

MEET THE GIRLS WHO LIVE, LOVE AND WORK AT —

THE RESORT



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• Only the rich can
afford such pleasure . . .
only the jaded
can enjoy it . . .!

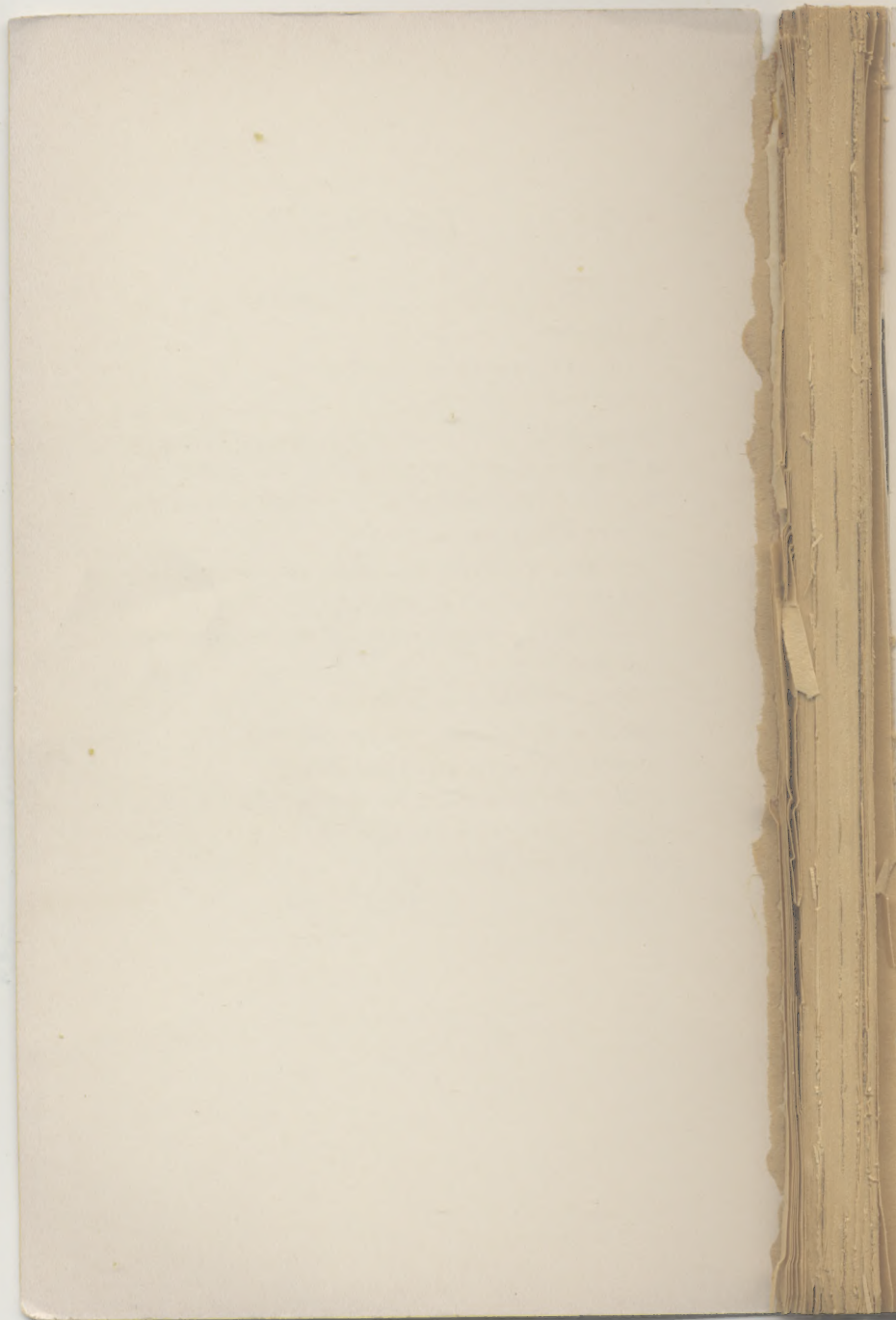


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MAX DAY



PRETTY TEASE

"Hi." There was no mistaking that voice. Or that laugh. He turned slowly.

"Oh, no!" Johnny said in dismay.

"Oh, yes!"

It was Monica Stone. She was sitting primly in his bed, propped up by the pillow. But, while she still wore all her clothes, she had pulled back the cover carefully and invitingly.

She giggled. "I took you up on your invitation."

"Well, you've got to get out."

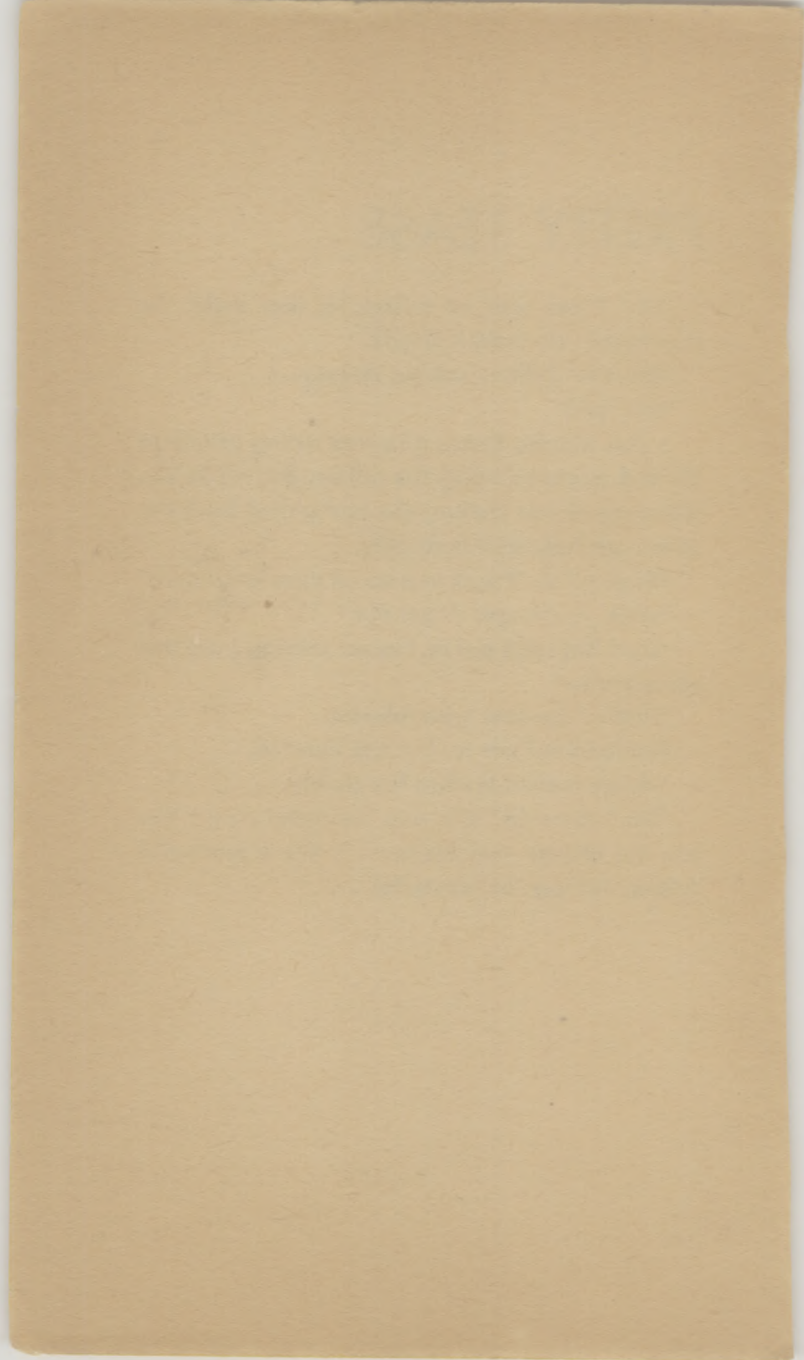
"Out? But I just got in. I'm not stirring from this room until—"

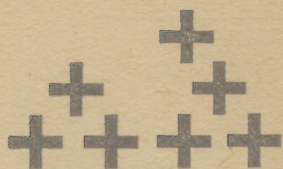
"Until—" he said with interest.

Monica tried not to, but she blushed.

Johnny moved toward her slowly.

"Oh," she said. "Oh, you masterful man." She ran her fingers over his face. "I like a masterful fellow. Johnny, be masterful . . ."





THE RESORT



MAX DAY



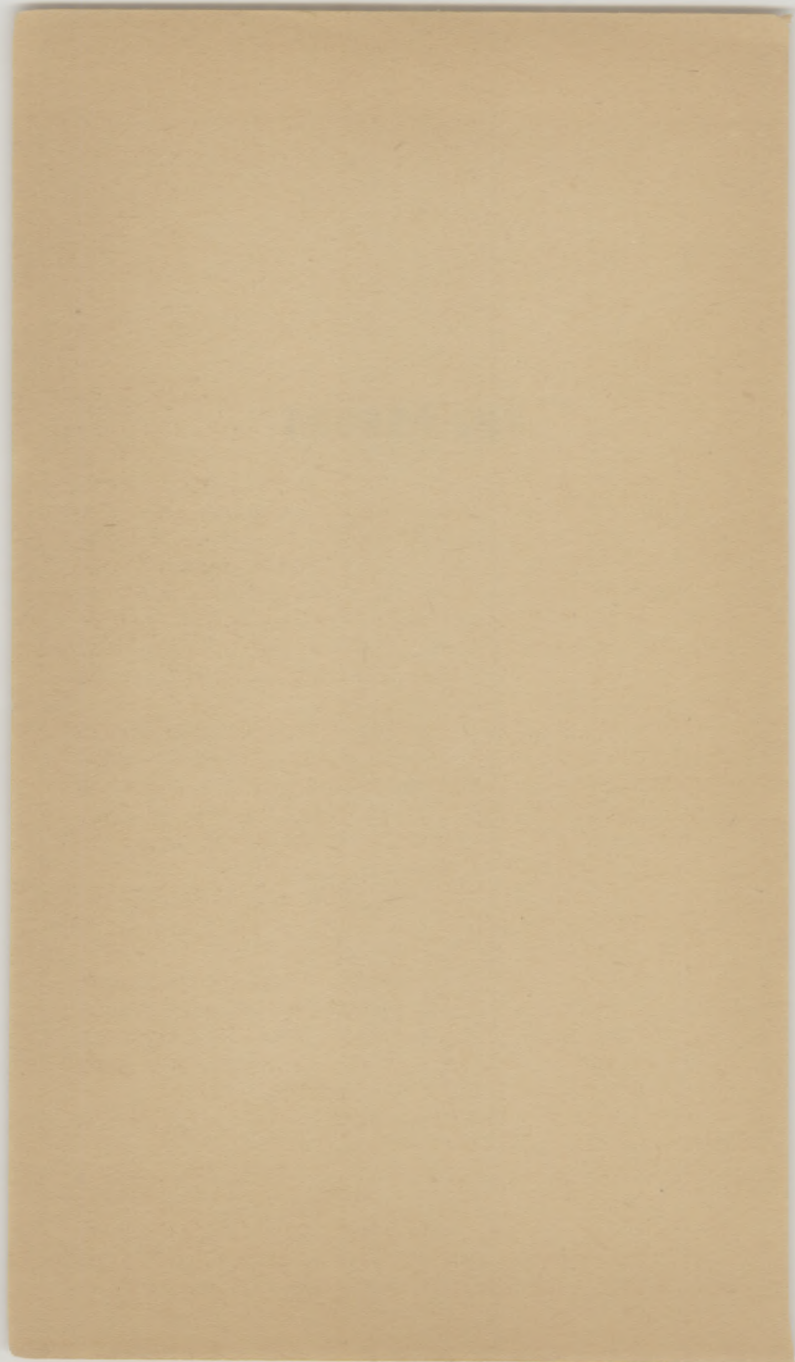
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THE RESORT



I

IT WAS Friday morning, and they still had not buried the body. Johnny walked to the dance floor and viewed the remains of the combo with a sad smile. It had been a gasser when it flew but, when the wings had come unstuck, it had hit old Mother Earth with a calamitous crash. The music racks looked right in place—headstones for the brave men who had fallen there. Johnny sauntered over to the piano and sat down. He struck a few melancholy chords on the old joybox, strictly for laughs, and then he punched out a few bars of *Got Them Blues*. The melody beat its wings forlornly against the lonesome walls of the tomb around him.

About then he noticed the handsome chick standing in the gloom; she was watching him out of hungry, wistful eyes. She came tall and stacked, built in that classic style of architecture that will never go out of fashion. At least, not so long as there are students of the human form.

"Mister," she said tentatively.

"Correct," Johnny said. "Mr. Blue. Johnny Blue."

"I'd like to get a job."

"Then I'm your boy. I'd like one, too."

The girl frowned. Now that he could see her more plainly, he knew his initial impression had been wrong. She was no wistful, helpless little waif. Her eyes, on second glance, looked as hard as beer bottle chips. And she did not seem to care for the beat talk.

"I'm a singer," she said. "And I understand you're leader of the band."

"As yet I haven't gotten my notice, Betty Jane. And I do have a contract, Emmy Lou. Which means I'm still in charge. We died on our opener last night," Johnny sighed, "but I guess our bossman has four tin ears instead of the usual three. So you're right, Jennie Mae. I'm leader."

"Nice try. It's Roxanne Hall."

"Much obliged. I was fresh out of monickers."

"I can sing popular music and torch songs and some novelty things."

"Well, we sure need something to hypo us up after last night's fiasco. Suppose you drop around this afternoon at rehearsal."

"Thank you, Mr. Blue," she said, and she reversed across the vast expanse of floor. Johnny watched her and he was struck anew by the wonderful machine that was woman, how lovely of construction, how desirable, how troublesome. He hit a few more sad chords on the piano, wondering how his band was ever going to hoist itself out of the slump it now was wallowing in. This was the lowest they had ever fallen. They were so far down they could hear Chinese.

2.

SHE WAS there when they started rehearsal, and after a few dispirited run-throughs Johnny introduced her and told the boys she was going to try out with them. She named a pop tune that was frankly from starvation, and Johnny sighed, and the boys on the stand sighed, and they got out the music and sat there, fingering their instruments uneasily. She turned and smiled at Johnny suddenly and he liked the friendly warmth the smile gave her face. It even took the jagged cutting edge off those beer bottle chips she had for eyes.

"Okay, boys," Johnny said, and he gave them the one-two on the battered old joybox.

The band slogged through the number like a weary dog chewing on an old tennis shoe, but the girl took her chorus in a deliberate and professional manner and, even though she would never sell two million sides with it, she had heart, she had fair pipes and she had considerable savvy. There was appeal also in the way she used her body. The square patrons of El Camino Real would not be too choosy about the words or the music, anyway. Johnny figured she would do—at least till he hit on a Dinah Shore or a Keely Smith.

He looked at the boys and the boys looked at him. Brad

Samson smiled for the first time in two days, Andy Orr kissed his sax and Skinhead Bates had both eyes fully open. Johnny signaled the boys to take five and walked Roxie Hall out into the first floor office Joel Salinas had said Johnny could use.

She sat down, cool as a cucumber and fresh as May in that cotton dress. Her face relaxed in the natural light, she seemed younger than she had on the bandstand. She seemed less businesslike, too, and more unseasoned in her struggle with life.

"You'll do," said Johnny Blue.

"Well, that's fine," she said noncommittally. She was giving Johnny the double-O with those blue cash register eyes.

"I can give you fifty skins a week."

She did not bat an eye. She stood up and walked to the door. She walked easy and proud, a good horse on a fast track. "Goodbye, Mr. Blue," she said politely. Johnny figured it was a bluff and leaned back in the chair and waited. But the girl opened the door and strolled out to the covered arcade and pretty soon he saw her in the bright California sunlight. She was heading toward the highway, her legs flashing under her skirt. He got up and went to the open window.

"Hey!" he called.

She turned.

"Come on back."

She shook her head.

"Twice it," Johnny shouted.

She shook her head and kept on walking.

"Three times!"

She stopped. She considered. She walked back. Johnny watched her, more fascinated than ever by the fluid, animal movement of that finely built body under that cotton dress. A hundred and fifty bucks a week, he thought with shock. He had been prepared to offer her sixty, tops, and here he was offering one hundred and fifty. And it came right out of his own cut, too. Stunned, he sat down.

The girl came in and smiled. "One-fifty."

"You come high," he said. "You got money in the bank you can bargain this way?"

She laughed and he liked her a lot for the way her eyes danced. "I'm flat broke."

"Then why did you bluff it out?"

"You want to know?" The blue eyes were flat now, wary.

Against his better judgment, Johnny nodded.

"I think your band is on the skids, Mr. Blue," she said. "Your sax hasn't got wind enough to blow his way out of a wet paper bag. That lead horn has a lip roll, if I ever heard a lip roll. Besides that, he plays straight from the sheet. I didn't hear one fresh riff. And your tub man is racing the beat. That arrangement—I guess you dreamed that one up yourself, Mr. Blue—a nowhere." She sat there looking at him out of those marvelously blue eyes. "Well, I guess that tears it. I suppose I'm fired."

"No," said Johnny. "But what puzzles me is this: why did you decide to stay when you seem so obviously interested only in the artistic end of it? When you're so far above the lousy gelt?"

She laughed. "Don't let my gumbeat fool you. There's only one man in my life: Mr. Jack."

"I don't usually get beat out in money propositions, sister. I guess I was a little bowled over by that body you ride around in."

"I didn't think you noticed things like that. I heard you were the kind of man that sleeps with dollar bills."

"Can you think of anything better?"

"Not offhand, frankly."

"The boys stink, Roxie," Johnny said finally. "I'm not apologizing. We've had our kicks, we've had our knocks. But this is the bottom of the rain barrel." He cast a glance at her. She was amused and cool and he liked more and more the way she handled herself. "Our sax man got that choppered lip in a brawl."

Roxie laughed softly. "With his boyfriend?"

Johnny squinted at her. "I see you've got him traced."

"He was the only one in the band who didn't give me the eye."

"That horn is Brad Samson—he plays it just like a colored man. When jazz was first getting started in Chicago in the twenties, his old man played with the Dorsey Brothers and Glen Gray. By the time Brad got home from

Hitler's dirty little ball, jazz was long gone, swing was swung, and rock-and-roll was in. Today he's got a cold sore. It's an occupational hazard. You can't cry because he doesn't get around too good on half a mouth."

"No," she said softly.

"That drum is Skinhead Bates—the best in the biz." Johnny stared at her openly. "He's on the stuff again, and he's racing the beat. Sure. So we hold him down while he's riding high, and we bolster him up when he's sagging. What do you want—a good steady man that gets here at eight P.M. every night but drags his mudhooks across the tubs like mamma flailing Monday's wash?"

Roxie smiled distantly. "I'll go along with that."

"And as for the arrangements," Johnny said, the heat beginning to rise in him slowly and belatedly, "I know they're beat to the socks. I was in a panic to make this date, and I didn't have the time to study them out. And now I don't think I'll bother, if it's any business of yours. I got this job on a lousy demo, and El Camino Real is stuck."

She was smiling, cool as a breeze, steady as a rock. She looked right into him. She saw him as he was and he knew it and it scared him.

"What are you staring at?" Johnny said. "You're hired. Now get out and ready up for rehearsal. We may have to woodshed all your numbers."

Roxie lifted herself out of the chair on those magnificent legs and stood gazing down at Johnny Blue. She smiled this time with understanding and sympathy and a shade of tenderness.

"I know about you," she said softly. "I've got a dozen of your old records at home. You can really write it, mister. And blow it. Johnny Blue's *Five Blue Notes*." Her eyes were dreamy. "I cried when I heard you the first time. I couldn't get over you. You were the greatest."

"Get out of here," Johnny said evenly.

"I guess I don't blame you," she sighed, "for going commercial."

"A man has to eat."

The girl laughed. "Caviar? You sold out for this when you could have gone places as a real musician." There was

sadness in her voice. "And now, El Camino Real. The highest class cat house on the West Coast."

Johnny Blue stood up, his heart hammering, his face burning. "You seem to like that long green an awful lot too, sister. I don't see what you've got to be so high-and-mighty about. You're here, aren't you?"

Roxie swayed in front of him. Her look turned in one instant to bitterness and hatred. "Yes," she admitted. "I'm here, too." She glared at him, and then made a swift exit. The door slammed. Johnny stared at it for a long time. He sat back in the chair and looked out the window at the shimmering June heat rising over the desert terrain. His hands turned into fists and his nails dug into his palms and the sweat popped out on his face. Everything she had said was true. And the fact that someone like her had said it made it worse.

He straightened his shirt collar, ran a comb through his hair, and walked out of the little office, whistling. It was a dirty, lousy racket—commercial music—and it took the good in a man and turned it into something evil.

What the hell, thought Johnny, defensively, a man's got to eat! A man's got to live! And, by God, why should anybody eat and live better than Johnny Blue?

3.

He took a ramble toward his own quarters over the grounds of El Camino Real, the movie colony's desert resort Roxie Hall had correctly dubbed the "highest class cat house on the West Coast."

El Camino Real is Spanish for The Royal Road, and any Californian learns in third grade that Father Junipero Serra, a Franciscan monk, in 1760 or thereabouts, made a knockdown walking tour of California to carry the gospel to the indigent Indians. Father Junipero—pronounced with a lot of wind and lungs "hew-nee-pay-row"—was a kindly and sturdy philosopher and, like most heroes in the colorful history of California, no native son.

Along his knocked-out road Father Serra stacked up some adobe-and-spit missions that later became overnight stops for weary footpads crossing the haunted California wasteland. The missions themselves have a distinct style of

architecture—a bit on the Doric side design-wise, as the boys with the T-squares and triangles would say, with campaniles, bell-shaped façades done in adobe, burnt brick or stone, and covered with white stucco and terra cotta trim. They can be seen free in any California Chamber of Commerce folder.

Joel Salinas, the boniface of El Camino Real, made good use of this mission style in erecting his fabulous cat house and gambling hell. El Camino Real had crap tables, gaming halls, card rooms, assignation chambers, hot and cold running girls, and almost anything else under the sun a Hollywood bigshot can't get on the inside of the law. The whole shebang was built in the style of the missions.

The main building, called the *posada* after the Spanish for "hotel," was a bastard combination of mission style and U.S. roadhouse, with long colonnades opening out onto a vast patio or walled-in garden to the rear. There was a spacious reception room, or lobby, mission-style, front and center, called the *pórtico*, Spanish for "lobby," where a night clerk in a beaded sombrero and serape and huaraches sat behind a plank counter that was artificially aged with ice-pick holes, whitewash and etching acid.

The dance hall, the *salón de baile* in Spanish, was mission-style, too—long and high-ceilinged with thick wooden rafters boxed around A-1 U.S. Steel I-beams. High, midget arches let in the sun through leaded church glass. During dancing hours at night electric lights behind these colored patterns threw a dazzling kaleidoscope of technicolor schmaltz over the transported dancers. It was a real weed-blower's nightmare.

The bar—*cantina*—*coffee shop*—*café*—and dining room—*comedor*—were all in the mission style, with thick wood planking and false adobe and stucco walls. The cottages spread out over the sprawling acreage of El Camino Real were joined together by a tortuous, winding, switch-back trail hewn out of rock, sand and stone.

The cottages along the El Camino Real trail, all twenty-one of them, were miniature copies of the real missions, as cynical a display of blasphemy as Johnny Blue had ever seen, and he had cast more than an eye over the stews of New York, the cesspools of Los Angeles, some

of the sinkholes of Europe and the Kasbahs of Tunis and Algiers.

Along the path between Mission San Fernando Rey de España and Mission San Gabriel Arcángel, Johnny caught sight of Brad Samson hurrying toward him. Brad, normally an indolent and self-satisfied cat, looked as jittery as a New Orleans hipster at the Metropolitan Opera.

The redhead's thin face was different somehow, *molto agitato*. He came up to Johnny, sweating. He kept looking to the right and left, away from Johnny. The two of them finally sat down on a stone bench labeled: *Rest for the Weary Stranger*.

"What a monolithic nightmare," Johnny said, indicating El Camino Real.

"El Camino Crapbill." Brad's spirit was ten feet below his socks.

"What's the bringdown? You look miserable."

"I don't ask for many favors, do I, Johnny?"

"Never have to. Anything you want, it's yours."

Brad's face clouded. "I know. That's what makes it tough."

"What is it, pal?"

"Johnny, I—" Brad dug his fist into his palm and stared at the dirt. "Hell. It's too much to ask."

"What is it? You got a monkey on the back?"

Brad nodded. "You've got to let me knock loose from this stand, Johnny. That's the long and short of it."

Johnny heard his own quickened breathing, about jump step. "What is this, Brad? You got yourself a better berth?"

Brad shook his head, his face miserable. "No, but hell—"

"Then what's bugging you?"

Brad smacked his fist into his palm, his elbows on his knees. "It's Marky."

Marky was Brad's dark-skinned, very cozy little wife, who was a fairly itty oblick but sadly in lack of self-control. Brad once described her as being geared to the mambo beat, and that summed it up pretty well. Erratic as a maracas player from Trinidad.

"What's her sad song?"

Brad looked puzzled, as if he was trying to figure it out

too. "Well, to blow the notes right on the chord, she's scared stiff."

"Of what?"

"Well, that's it," Brad murmured, his eyes scanning the far-off tip of San Gorgonio Mountain that poked up like an ice-cream cone in the distance. "I don't know. Something. Somebody. All very vague."

"She must have told you something."

"She did, Johnny. She said, 'I'm scared. You've got to get me out of here.' You know the way she says it. Those ideas she dreams up in Spanish and translates to English and then says in straight beatnik."

Johnny had heard Marky talk, all right, and he knew how she sounded: a tape recording of a Chihuahua clambake. "Maybe she isn't scared at all. Maybe she's telling you you'd better get her a size twelve summer dress for her birthday or she'll swap you for a trombone man."

"I wouldn't bull you, Johnny. The kid is frantic. She's white-faced and shaking like a tenor sax at a Harlem clambake."

"Well, if we don't know what's bringing her down, how can we woodshed her out of it?"

"It's a tough gaff, Johnny. I tried to figure it out. But I'm out on a limb, and I'm sawing, and the saw's between me and the tree trunk."

"You can't leave us now, Brad. I get the feeling of the leader rat blowing a sinking ship. Let me talk to Marky. I'll fix it up."

Brad sighed dubiously. "You're the sawbones. I hope you can."

4.

JOHNNY FOUND Marky in the front room of Mission San Buenaventura. She was seated on a wide sponge rubber couch, immobile. She stared out the open door into the heat, her eyes wide and glassy. Johnny walked in and looked out the door too, but he saw nothing but cactus and juniper and heat waves.

"Hi, Marky," he said. "Somebody following me?"

Marky turned her face to Johnny; her eyes stared right through him. It was as if Marky's mind were somewhere

else, too terrified to think of what was directly in front of her. Johnny decided to play it cool and cozy. This chick would split the clouds if he hit her head-on.

"*Buenos días, Johnny,*" she whispered with that nice little lisp she had. She talked English like a native—of Acapulco. But her lisp was musical and it fitted in with her dusky face and her dark black eyes.

"What's the problem here? You and Brad want to take off on a second honeymoon or something?"

The laughter died on her lips, and then they trembled. She had a full mouth, and her eyes were almond-shaped and very dark. Her hair was jet black and she wore it in curls, like an early silent movie queen. She had earrings that jangled in A flat and E flat, and a narrow black band around her throat from which hung a gold pendant. Her wrists were bangled in bracelets, and these jounced in a quarter tone above E natural that gave a very sour counterpoint to the earrings. Marky was a little creature but powered by wide hips and distinguished by that big bosom characteristic of south of the border. Altogether she gave the impression of having a wonderful lusty animal strength fleshed in a flawless coffee color.

But, Lord, she was scared.

"Brad must go. We must both go. *Por favor, Johnny.* You must let us go!"

"You're no square, Marky. You know this whole combo is riding on Brad's lip. Right now there's not much left to hold together, but with him gone it's *ritardo, diminuendo,* and *fin* for us all."

Marky clasped and unclasped her hands in her lap. She had hold of something and she was studying it and then she was letting it go. She was adding up the chances she would be taking if she told and then she was adding up the chances she was taking if she did not tell. It came out in favor of the bad guys. She broke. Her eyes brimmed with tears, but she pretended it was not so.

"Marky," said Johnny, feeling the ground going out from under him, "you've got to let him stay! It's a matter of life and death!"

Her eyes saw the devil himself. They widened. Her mouth opened. Her nostrils flared. "Sh! It is a matter of life and death, Johnny! It is the reason why we must go!"

There went the old ball game, Johnny thought. "Marky," he said softly, touching her shoulder with his palm, bringing up the old Johnny Blue charm from the cellar where it had been aging for the past several years.

"No!" She jerked away. Her eyes shone glassily again and she sat as immovable as a Segregationalist.

Johnny could hardly bring himself to phrase his next words. "It's not us, is it, Marky? You and I? Brad hasn't found out about that?"

Johnny's reference was to a night that had come about shortly after he had met Brad's wife. Brad had been off to a one-night recording stand in Hollywood and Johnny had promised to amuse Marky, and he had. Marky had been so amused, so full of liquor and the joy of life that she had practically laughed Johnny right into the sheets with her. Johnny, with an iron will he had not known he had possessed, had resisted the invitation and had lectured Marky very piously about the code of friendship between him and Brad preventing lapses of propriety. All the while Marky had sat there in bed, stripped, giggling at Johnny and jiggling her earrings and bracelets and everything else she had. And Old Ironsides John Blue had stalked out in a big huff, amazed at himself for having been able to resist that luscious little morsel of unpredictable spitfire—and more than incidentally hoping no other test would present itself. Twice would be too much for any man. Now Marky's clouded eyes rose to Johnny's face. "Us?" She shook her head after a moment. "That time? Oh, no, Johnny! Nothing like that. Ah, that it should be so simple!"

A weight lifted from Johnny. He had felt uneasy about that incident for a long time. Whatever the problem might be, it would certainly be cleared up eventually. He patted her knee, laughing self-consciously.

"Get a little rest, Marky. You'll be all right. Be sure to take your aspirin. And eat your vegetables. Vitamins, you know, Marky."

Marky's lips curled back from her teeth. Johnny was startled to see the sharp points of her incisors. She had all the earmarks of a cornered animal. She snarled at him in Spanish—a language built for snarling—but he could not make out the words. He dug the tone. It was the hiss of a snake. He got goose bumps hearing it.

He left her sitting on the couch, Calamity Jane in the flesh, and wandered up the path toward the *posada*. There was no sight of Brad anywhere. Brad had his problems, Johnny thought, but if he couldn't handle that food wench of his, he shouldn't have married her. He knew that if he told Brad that, Brad would smile an old soldier's smile and tell Johnny to blow it out his A bag.

For a startled moment Johnny thought he heard the sound of hysterical sobs coming from the Mission San Buenaventura but then he dismissed the impression as completely impossible. He decided not to bother to investigate. He was tired of playing nursemaid and Hawkshaw to the nutnik wives of his sidemen. Whatever the problem was, it was certainly none of his business. Let Brad take care of it, he mentally shrugged.

Still, Johnny could not rid himself of the crawls at the terrible fear that lurked in Marty's eyes. That fear smelled of disaster and death and had something to do with Brad, of course. Johnny knew that as clearly as he knew the key of C minor.

But what exactly?

2

MUCH INK has been spilled and many typewriter ribbons raped by the experts trying to explain exactly what made the bottom drop out of the band business. Phenomena such as television, spectator sports, inflation and Freud have been cited as causes. But there is no real agreement on any one answer. No one has had the guts to suggest lousy bands. Johnny Blue had a sneaking hunch therein lay the prime cause.

When World War II came along, most of the big name bands that had been great during the Thirties broke up, and the players went into the armed forces to play sidemen for Uncle Sam.

Then, after the war was over, and the musicians came back, the big names tried to start up again, but a new curse voodooed them: that old devil inflation. That cost

the clubs too much of those midget bucks to hire the big names, and the nitery ops took to canned music and public address systems.

And when most of the musicians were forced into the recording business, they found themselves reading close to the paper—all the ingenuity and the invention went out of the music when there was no live audience to play to. And once the musicians lost interest, the public did, too. The public turned in its boredom to personalities, hillbilly hoedowns, and rock-and-roll.

John Q. Public is a strange and unpredictable beast: he will wallow in his own filth for a long time until he gets tired smelling himself and then he will haul himself up and slowly walk away. He will walk away from today's musical hog trough, you can bet your last dollar on that. When, is a good question.

After the war Johnny Blue got Brad Samson, his lead horn, and Andy Orr, his sax, and Skinhead Bates, his drums, and Ambles Bennett, his guitar, and together they beat out a dozen or so top sides for the real cats. They sat back and waited for the platters to shovel in the gelt.

But nothing happened. The twelve solid instrumentals they had knocked out died at the juke boxes, snowed under by Corn-Flakes-and-Molasses "personality" records by young kids with adenoids and jailbait chicks with cigarette throats.

Johnny and Brad finally landed a job with one of the big name orks specializing in weird sounds, nut numbers, and various schmaltzy gimmicks. A man had to eat. But everybody was getting into the act, and Johnny and Brad were crowded out of the business by some of the sharper operators—the fly cats who made friendship a commercial thing, and who wine and dined the leaders and oiled them up with banana juice about their genius ratings. And a little payola here, and a little kickback there.

One year there, when there was no sideman's job in the whole forty-eight—that was the time there were only forty-eight and Texas was the biggest—Johnny worked in an aircraft factory and cornered stacks of coin looking over blueprints and inspecting assembly lines.

That lasted until he got so restless and bitter he quit

one night after a drunken rock-'em sock-'em jam session with a bunch of the old jazz hounds. Johnny was fed up to the hairline with that nut-and-bolt, by-the-numbers existence, and he even hated the sight of money stamped out on those rattling check machines. He could never settle down to that for the rest of his life.

He ran into Brad in San Francisco. Brad, a wife just added to his string, was playing in a bistro with Skinhead Bates, who was now on the junk, and Andy Orr, who had traveled off on a tangent of his own down Nance Boulevard. The leader of the band played the eighty-eights and had no need of Johnny as a musician, but he did hunger for some progressive jazz arrangements.

Progressive was all the rage, then, scintillating nowhere embellishments on the old standby riffs from the early days. Johnny studied a raft of records one weekend and woodshedded up a group of arrangements for the band-leader, who became very charged up over them.

In Los Angeles the leader was stabbed to death in a *pachuca* war on Spring Street one stale October evening when the smog hung like a pall over the pueblo of the *Lost Angels*, and the band was out of biz.

Johnny took over and started it up again, determined to hit the big time, simply because it was more comfortable there than on Starvation Lane.

He ground out twenty-five arrangements after digesting a group of rock and rollers hot from the juke boxes, and the boys made some deadbeat tape tracks. Johnny sent these around and landed a job in a Los Angeles night club on Southwestern, way out in tract heaven. And the money came in as long as they stuck to the schmatz and the pop slop.

They were fired in a Las Vegas joint for playing too many old jazz favorites—that was before the freak revival of tunes of the Twenties—and once again in Denver for going on a real blues binge. That was Ambles Bennett's fault. He got the combo into a solid groove with his guitar one night, and they worked up ten blues things, twice-five too many for Denver.

They had learned their lesson by then. No experimentation. Nothing off the beaten track. Rock-and-roll—and rock again. The combo prospered. But the boys got slop-

plier and sloppier in their technique. Andy played behind the beat. Brad let his lip go slack and found it impossible to blow a blues note. Skinhead was dragging and he was on the white stuff again.

They started drinking heavily and brawling. By the night of the El Camino Real opening, Brad had a cold sore on his lip from some gastric disturbance brought on by too much booze and fighting with his young wife; Andy had a fat lip presented him by a departing boyfriend from Santa Barbara; and Skinhead was on the way into another junk jamboree. So it went. The opening was a bird. Johnny was amazed they were not fired outright.

But the operators of these dance joints rarely had good ears, except for listening to the tinkle of the cash register. If that machine slowed down its tempo half a beat, the proprietors hopped around like fleas on a hot griddle, screaming for some good smooth music to drag in the ickies.

Joel Salinas was no exception. But he was a little more subtle about it. At least he scratched your back to divert you while he beat on your ears from the front. A smooth op. An hombre to watch out for.

2.

After dinner, Johnny stopped at the big gaming room upstairs and took a peep into the place, checking up on the boys. Some of these smart owners tried to cut down their operating costs by suckering the sidemen into heavy debt at the tables, and then attaching the band's instruments and rolling equipment. Johnny would not put that past Salinas, although that hombre appeared to be of a slightly smoother breed.

The gaming room was crawling with whickerbills and knockabouts crying to be relieved of their scratch. There were dozens of movie colony meatheads out for the gay time. Johnny stood in amazement, watching the Hollywood mob of well-heeled, well-tanned, well-profiled suckers standing about with their tongues out and their eyes popping, so many marks all crying to be taken.

Salinas himself was standing against a wall, a stack of blue chips in his hands. He was smiling out over the

crowd, his black eyes sparkling. And if Johnny read the man right, Salinas was watching some broad he was interested in. That meant anything in bra or bobby sock.

Salinas was a tall, saturnine man with dark skin and a thin trimmed mustache that made his face look like Machiavelli's. His eyes were smouldering black, the kind women considered romantic; to Johnny they resembled fly specks in cold gravy. Salinas belonged to that long thin breed born to stroke guitar strings and to bend down over a woman's hand to tickle her hide with the cookie duster.

Johnny followed Salinas' gaze toward the big roulette table where potbellied cinemaland toffs and ermined starlets stood around throwing good money after bad, trying to whip up a shade of excitement from their sclerotic arteries. As Johnny looked, a girl detached herself from the group at the wheel of misfortune, and he saw it was Roxie Hall. She walked to Salinas, her hands spread out empty. She was laughing, and Johnny felt sick. Salinas handed Roxie a few more blue chips, touching her arm as he talked. He could not resist touching a woman if he stood within pawing distance. The thought of Salinas' hand on Roxie's arm made Johnny's skin crawl. But, he concluded, money was what Roxie was after, why shouldn't she go to the head hog at the biggest trough?

Salinas gave the girl more chips, patted her shoulder patronizingly and sent her to the wheel with a little caress on her sitdown. Salinas watched Roxie appraisingly as she fishtailed away from him, and Johnny knew Freud was right. A moment later Salinas' eyes were on Johnny. The owner sifted the remaining chips through his fingers, buzzing them rapidly. In a moment, Johnny stood beside Salinas next to the wall. "A fly chick," said Johnny softly.

Salinas grunted. "In your own peculiar fashion, I suppose you are remarking what a nice looking girl Roxie is."

"Also complimenting her on her ability to land on her feet no matter where she jumps."

"She tells me she's been hired to sing with the band."

"Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I auditioned her this afternoon."

"So she told me."

"She's got fair pipes. But she's apt to mangle the

words. You know, accentuate them and to hell with the melody."

"Oh? I think the customers like that. I know I do."

"She'll probably do okay," Johnny murmured. "We're working on a pretty tight budget. We can use her, all right, but it'll cost me too much to hire her." Johnny shot a penetrating glance at Salinas. "I thought maybe, if you figured she was solid, you might agree to foot the bill."

Salinas smiled, the dollars showing in his eyes. "That's an odd arrangement."

Johnny chuckled like a con man on the blast. "Of course it is, and I shouldn't have brought it up at all. We'll drop the idea. Out she goes. All dames do is bring trouble, anyway."

He turned to go. He was almost to the door of the game room and he was sweating like late July before he heard it.

"Stop." Salinas' languid dirty eyes were studying him carefully. He beckoned. "Come back here, Mr. Blue. You're too quick on the trigger."

Johnny came back. His eyes were innocent as Little Boy Blue. Salinas gazed out into the room full of film colony arbuckles and smiled. "Whatever gave you the idea that I didn't want the girl here?"

"You didn't seem eager to pay her way."

"How much does she want?"

Johnny didn't turn a hair. "Two-fifty a week."

Salinas whistled. "A greedy little grifter, that one." He chuckled. "Still, I suppose that's the way to get along in the world. Hire her. I'll add two-fifty to your salary." Salinas waved his hand in the air contemptuously. "It's really small potatoes." His knowledgeable eyes were on Johnny. It was as if he knew all about that extra hundred Johnny had bled out for himself.

Johnny felt hot. He remembered Salinas' hand on Roxie's arm. He glanced across the teeming room at Roxie and he could see her flushed face and her damp mouth and the tanned gold of her skin rising proudly out of her dress.

Salinas nudged Johnny. His voice was ice cold. "Try to make that lovely music just a shade more lovely than it

was last night, amigo." Behind Salinas' placid features there were snakes writhing. "It stinks."

Johnny bit his lip, but Salinas continued:

"I'm paying you a whopping big fee for that cheap pickup band. Those Hollywood hipsters out there want the best. They'll get it or I'll cancel that contract."

Johnny's blood pounded. "You breach that contract, sir, and I'll see you never sign on a big-name band at this fleabag. And I can do it."

Salinas sized up Johnny again. He sifted the chips through his fingers. "Ah. With the help of The Local, eh?"

"I've seen your kind con musicians into debt at the crap tables and the galled wheels. You keep away from my men."

"I have little interest in your men, Mr. Blue," Salinas said in an insinuating, silken tone.

"The girl, too. Roxie Hall," Johnny said evenly.

"You make it hard for a reasonable man to like you, Mr. Blue," Salinas said slowly. "Are you prepared to send Miss Hall out of here, screaming, as a test of your authority?"

"I haven't told her yet," Johnny said with a grin. "And I doubt that she's the screaming kind."

"I guess the best thing for you to do, Mr. Blue," Salinas muttered, "is to stay out of my hair."

"That suits me fine," Johnny said.

Roxie Hall came across the room. "Oh, hello, Mr. Blue," she said brightly. "Here are some chips back, Mr. Salinas." She shifted a handful of chips to him but he pressed them back in her hand unavily.

"Cash them in, Roxie. They're yours," he said.

Johnny broke in stiffly. "It's about time for the band to start warming up, Roxie."

She smiled. "Yes, sir, Mr. Blue." She moved off across the floor at an easy clip, weaving her body in and out of the rich, upholstered daniels blocking her way.

Salinas frowned blackly as Roxie moved to the door. Johnny wondered what Roxie meant by that overdone, extra-polite, "Yes, sir, Mr. Blue" routine. He didn't like it one solid bit. Salinas had been too burned to notice it. Johnny's first instincts had been right: bring in a dance, he

thought, and there's bound to be trouble; music and sex don't mix.

3.

But music and sex more than mixed that night. They made a charge. The presence of Roxie on that stand stoked the boys with the added something they needed. Johnny could feel Brad's horn pushing up through the roof for a real break-through, cold sore or no cold sore; and when Brad began pushing, Skinhead Bates woke up at the drums and gave him a good solid underpinning to build on. Andy chipped in and blew a foundation note for the background chord, and Ambles Bennett beat out a boardwalk to run a whole army on.

Johnny's new arrangements began to sound good. That meant the boys were improvising from Johnny's notes, adding a new riff or two of their own, embellishing the basic pattern and tearing down a few barns when the occasion demanded. By the time the first ten-minute break came around, the boys were hot as Mexican tamales.

And Roxie, Johnny silently thanked her, had provided the skin.

3

JOHNNY BLUE took his break in the almost deserted coffee shop. As the girl poured him his cup of black jaya, he glanced up to see a familiar face.

It was Holly Salinas, Joel Salinas' wife.

She was seated at a table in the corner, alone. She was smoking a cigarette, letting the smoke curl up around her eyes and around her soft blond hair. Her lips were wide and curved. She was built like a million greenbacks, and she was a certificate for danger. She could have had anybody in El Camino Real, millionaire or musclebound pauper.

Johnny had no idea how she had ever gotten tangled up in Joel Salinas' bed sheets. Here she was, queen of

a gambling and roadhouse hell, but she could have been in top of any pile she chose, from solid gold Cadillacs to a nose cone at Canaveral. It simply did not make sense that she should be here.

Holly nodded to him and Johnny brought his cup of coffee. She held the purse strings for Salinas, obviously. Certainly no woman with what she had on the ball would be bossed around by a cardboard caballero like Salinas. It would pay Johnny to be polite. He had a sneaking suspicion Holly Salinas had been preparing to speak to him anyway. About other matters.

"I'm astonished to find you alone, Mrs. Salinas. A woman as beautiful as you." Johnny struck just the right note between mockery and gallantry.

Holly's mouth curved into a rich, soft smile.

"Oh, Johnny, come now. It's Holly. You don't need to ladle out the old oil. You're safe under contract."

"A man needs to cudge his bets," Johnny laughed.

Close to Holly, he could very nearly feel the pale, lovely skin of her shoulders rising out of her evening dress. The deep cleft between her breasts plunged down into shadowy, voluptuous folds. A subtle scent rose from her; it was old-fashioned and at the same time startlingly modern; a tinge of romance, a tinge of sadness, a tinge of raw savage lust. Johnny wondered how much the expert had charged for dreaming up that formula.

Holly shrugged, her hazel gold-flecked eyes held on Johnny's face magnetically. Slowly they traveled over his mouth, down his neck, along his shoulders. He was proud of those wide shoulders and that developed chest, and right now he thought he had never before been this glad to have a woman see through his clothes the way Holly Salinas did. Then her eyes came back to his face and her brows rose. She had completed her inspection and he had passed again with flying colors.

Johnny sat quietly, waiting. He could sense it. She was getting ready to sink in the shaft. She was waiting to mention the possibility of taking up a few moments of Johnny's time. He had played enough jobs to know the symptoms. The bored wives of the rich men who hired him . . . the dash of romance they all craved with the good-looking, fast-living band leader . . . the interesting

diversion with a man whose morals were as liberal and free as their own.

It was getting so a band man had to be one-eighth musician and seven-eighths stud.

Instead she said, "You don't need to worry, Johnny. The band sounds good." He glanced at her quickly. Had he been wrong? he wondered. Wasn't she on the make? Then another thought occurred to him. Perhaps she was speaking about the band, but angling for information about Roxie Hall. Perhaps she suspected Joel Salinas was interested in the girl.

"The girl's okay," Johnny said slowly. "She's got good pipes. And good stems."

"Joel seems impressed. Joel may be right." Her voice took on an edge. "He's an expert on those things."

Johnny sat warily drinking his coffee. The situation began shaping up. If Holly played herself and Johnny against her husband and Roxie, perhaps she could get Joel to come crawling to her, dragging his mustache on the kitchen linoleum.

Johnny laughed. "Of course he's an expert. He hired me, didn't he?"

Holly laughed, throwing her head back so the whiteness of her throat and bosom and shoulders smothered him. It wouldn't be too bad, he nodded to himself, dreaming up a few duets with this chicken dinner. And to stab Salinas in the heart with a well-chosen one-night stand, Johnny thought, would give Mr. Blue all the pleasure of a first-class kick.

"Are you married?" she asked abruptly.

"No."

"Why not?" Her perfume became more enveloping.

"Why should I get married? As a bachelor I have all the advantages and none of the disadvantages."

"Of course. Exactly what I've told Joel hundreds of times."

"Before you were married?"

"Before." The hazel gold-flecked eyes were dancing now with laughter. "But a woman like me doesn't change her opinions just because of some trifling civil ceremony."

Johnny leaned back. He played with the spoon in his coffee saucer. Now that the point was made, she changed

the subject. "That young man on the horn, that Brad Samson," she said softly. "I don't know anything about music, but that man—how do the teen-agers say it?—he really gets around."

"A solid car," Johnny murmured. Brad's trouble still rankled him.

She caught his dissatisfaction. "You musicians never do like each other, do you? What is it, professional jealousy?"

Johnny stared at her. "Brad's my best friend. We've played together for fourteen years, off and on. He's the best white horn in the business."

"Ah, Damon and Pythias. He seems worried about something. What?" Her face was elaborately casual. She fumbled in her purse for a cigarette.

Johnny felt little prickles of warning. "I don't know. We've all got a monkey on our back somewhere." Then he stood up abruptly. "Good night, Mrs. Salinas. It's been a jam-up jawbreak. But I do have to get back to the stand."

Holly's voice grew sharper. "If this Brad Samson's trouble is anything that will hurt El Camino Real, Mr. Blue, we should certainly know about it." Through the thin screen of smoke, Johnny stared down at Holly's face.

"You hold the purse strings, Mrs. Salinas. I dig your jive, because you're Mrs. Boss. But it's just jive. It's just gab. My private life is my own."

Holly smiled, her eyes cold. "You put everything on a commercial level, Mr. Blue. I don't think I like you very much."

"I got the impression you hated my guts, Mrs. Salinas," he said carefully. "But, of course, that doesn't alter anything we discussed before, does it?"

Holly took the cigarette away from her cool, smooth lips and tapped it gently. She breathed, each breath lifting her breasts invitingly, moving the shadows in that deep cleft. "I'm sure it doesn't, Mr. Blue. Personal opinions should never interfere with pleasure. Do yours?"

"Never. Good night, Mrs. Salinas."

"Good night, Mr. Blue," murmured Holly Salinas, her lips curled in a thoughtful smile. As Johnny walked out of the coffee shop her eyes followed him with admiration.

and they traveled up and down his body several times. Her nerves tingled. At the door Johnny turned and smiled. The sweat was sticky on his face. He could still feel the softness and the smoothness of her skin under his fingertips, and he had never touched her. He licked his tongue over the tips of his teeth and strolled across the dance hall to the bandstand.

2.

They finished up the first half before intermission with a knockdown dragout rendition of one of Johnny's own numbers, *Crashing Through the Sound Barrier*, and Johnny called out to take five. He got up from the piano almost limp with fatigue and empty of emotion. For awhile there, he thought, he'd forgotten he was playing for money. He was almost enjoying himself. He laughed and shook his head.

As he looked up he caught Roxie's eye, and it was full of admiration. The moment she saw him looking at her she turned away, fumbling with a stack of music under her chair. Then she got up and walked off.

Brad met Johnny in the men's john. Johnny soaked his face in water and wiped it off, fanning himself. Brad washed his hands slowly.

"Johnny, I meant to tell you sooner but I couldn't find you."

"Still have trouble with Marky?"

"I'm cutting out with her after the tag number tonight."

Johnny stared at Brad, and all the lead man's clean exhilaration was dissipated; he felt tension knot the muscles between his shoulders. "What, Brad?"

"I'm taking off, kid, like a big bird. Marky's in a bad jam. She's scared stiff."

"Maybe she's going to have a baby or something. Did you ask?"

"It's not that. Listen, it must be something lousy. A kid like her probably has plenty in her past she wants to keep covered. I've got to go, Johnny."

"I can't let you."

Brad turned and looked in the mirror, staring at his

worried face. "Tough gall, kid. I'm leaving after the chaser."

Johnny walked closer to Brad. "Boy, don't you get the picture? We're finally in synch! Didn't you dig? We're on a solid track."

Brad swung around. "Listen," he said huskily, "don't you think I hate running out now, when everything's on the upbeat? Hell, man, I'd cut out my tongue if it'd let me stay!"

"If it's the goddamned money that's getting you, I'll double your take right this minute!" Johnny knew it had nothing to do with money, and why he said it he never knew, but once it was out it was too late.

Brad turned red, then almost purple. He stared at Johnny as if he were some strange make of rodent, and he hauled off and smashed his fist into Johnny's mouth.

Johnny felt the blow on his face and he felt the taste of salt all through him, as he jatted back against the wash basin. He came up out of a loose crouch and fit into Brad's chest and stomach. Every instinct in him kept him from going for Brad's lip, but he hammered and slashed away to drive Brad back into the urinals.

Brad cut Johnny's face on both sides.

It was then that the door to the rest room burst open. Two of the uniformed bouncers Joel Salinas kept around the *posada* to clear out drunks and psychos ran up and pulled the two of them apart. The bouncers were big bruisers, each dressed in a uniform similar to a secret police uniform of some South American banana republic.

"Hold it down, boys," rumbled the biggest of the two, pinning Johnny's arms behind him. "Hear me?" He was a beety-faced man with swollen eyes and cauliflower ears and thick lips.

The other man, a freckled wrestler type with a boyish face and a brush mop that made him look like a twenty-year-old, jiggled Brad Samson up and down.

"You ready to say Uncle?"

Brad looked at Johnny sulkily.

Johnny grinned finally. "Natch, flatfoot. We're old friends."

The big man behind Johnny tightened his grip. "Don't call me flatfoot, bumboy!"

Then he spun Johnny away viciously.

Johnny turned to the big bouncer. Across the jacket, a name was stitched in red thread. "Art Feist."

Feist. Johnny would remember that name. This cat was obviously Joel Salinas' secret police chief. The uniformed bouncers were as much Salinas' private guards as anything else. They wore guns under their jackets. Johnny could see the bulges the weapons made.

"You finks cooled down?" the big man named Feist called from the doorway as Johnny and Brad went over to the basins to dash cold water on their faces.

"Real cool," said Johnny. "Beat it, Feist."

Feist grinned at the second bouncer, a man who had the name "Barney Calhoun" stitched across his chest. "Okay, Barney. Let's blow."

They did.

"Sorry, kid," said Brad, after the two bruisers had left. "I lost my head when you mentioned money. I don't think that way."

"Forget it," said Johnny. "What's got me buffaloed is this: your leaving will breach our contract with Salinas. He'll toss us out on our dusters. I hate to give him a handle to pump with."

Brad whistled. "I didn't think of that." He stared morosely out the back window.

"Let's go. Sorry again for the hassle."

"I'll tell Marky I'm not going," Brad said finally.

"Forget it. Take off. We'll get along."

"Now don't tell me you don't need me. I'll cry. Count me in." Brad grinned. "Oh," he said, rubbing his jaw, "thanks for saving my lip."

Johnny laughed. "'Tis a fat lip that blows nobody any good."

They played through the last half of the stand with the audience in the palm of their hand. Then they boxed up their instruments with grins a mile wide.

Brad left right way. Johnny watched him go, wondering what line of jive the horn man would reel out to Marky to turn off her hot and cold running terror. At least Brad had seen the light. The band was red hot, and Johnny knew a good man couldn't drop away from a develop-

ment that might be the turning point for each member of the combo.

Rexie hurried out, too, and Johnny found himself standing by the piano with Andy Orr and Skinhead Bates. He wired them into the *pasada*'s bar where the trio sat around drinking and swapping shop talk.

Most bands rehearse after the night's chaser, but Johnny had never made it a practice. They did their woodshedding during the day. The married men used their nights to keep their wives happy.

"What's with Brad?" Andy asked. "He looked brought down tonight. Up on the mountain there, best stanza, I thought he'd bill half his choruses. But now he's back in key. Anybody know?"

"His wife," Johnny said.

Andy looked reassured. "Thank God I'll never have problems like that."

Skinhead laughed. "What about that fat lip you're sporting tonight, satchel mouth?"

Andy looked down his nose at his ruined lip. He looked self-righteous. "I bumped it on a drinking fountain."

3.

After listening to half hour of the gas, Johnny got up and exited. He felt good. The thought of Rexie came to him, but he had no idea where she had gone, unless she was swapping leers with Salinas, because she was certainly nowhere to be seen out in the patio. Odd couples were rubbing necks on the stone benches and in the juniper bushes, but Johnny could not discern a friendly face anywhere. He wandered out across the moonlit landscape. It was as tortured and stark as a Dali painting: the chollas jabbed their spikes into the air, the manzanitas stuck agonized arms out, theJoshuas flailed the atmosphere and the spikes of yucca dotted the hills. And over the entire scene millions of sparklers twinkled, as if these were the majestic notes a master musician spread across the biggest lead sheet in the universe.

Down on the ground squatted El Camón Real, the royal crapfill, blaspheming earth, sky and universe. But it made money, and it stirred the tired and cynical people

of the movie industry to feel they were really living it up.

Johnny turned and walked along the highway to get away from it all. There was a motte of jackpines across the road from El Camino Real. Johnny thought he could cool his soles there and think out his new relationship with that fly chick Roxie Hall. Something was working here but he could not read the notes clearly.

Holly Salinas, was, of course, a perfectly clear number. There was no problem there.

But Roxie Hall. Somehow, Johnny grumbled to himself, it wasn't natural a girl of Roxie's background should be at a place like El Camino Real. There was more to her than a pair of legs, a million buck figure and a fast line. She knew something about music and she had good breeding.

Johnny frowned. He cut across the highway and walked along the shoulder. From here he could look across at El Camino Real and the miles of winding pathways and the miniature missions set a hundred yards apart up and down the sandy juniper-clad slopes. Lights twinkled here and there—somebody up reading a book, beating a wife, drowning a sorrow.

Johnny stumbled in the dark. He stepped back, trying to see what it was in the darkness. It looked like something huddled beside the road, maybe a bag of mail or a sack of dirty socks. He struck a match. Light spread out from the flame and touched the figure lying on the shoulder of the highway. It was a man, unconscious, or stewed to the gills.

Johnny leaned over. The match dropped out of his hand. He took a quick breath. He had seen blood on the man's clothes. Blood, caked and matted. And rips of cloth. With his fingers shaking, Johnny drew out another match and struck it. This time he knew there was no mistake; this was a man lying there. A man, bloody, beaten and crushed. With a sickening jolt, Johnny saw that the figure must have been run over by a car. He could see what looked like the dirty tread marks of a tire on the man's white shirt.

Johnny turned him over so the face stared upward. The eyes were closed. The mouth was open and blood oozed out of a corner. The gums were torn and mangled. Broken

teeth hung in the battered gums. Air bubbled slowly up out of the throat.

Johnny saw the red hair, the five-o'clock shadow of orange beard. The wreck was a familiar one.

Brad Samson.

The wreck had been what was once a trumpet player, but would never blow a trumpet ever again, no, not without those essential front teeth. The wreck had been what was once a good-looking man, a clean-cut young man sharply profiled and with a good smile, but Brad would never again be accused of handsomeness.

Johnny cursed as the match flickered out.

He leaned over and felt the pulse. There was no doubt of it; Brad Samson was still alive. But what good was being alive when everything the man wanted out of life was gone?

Johnny Blue bunkered there on the shoulder of the road a long time, staring out into the night about him, a helpless bitterness rising in him. This was all his fault. Johnny had brought Brad Samson to El Camino Real and he had talked him into remaining when Brad had wanted to leave.

Except for Johnny Blue, Brad Samson might have avoided this hit-and-run accident on the highway that had deprived him of his face and teeth. Except for Johnny Blue, his best friend, Brad Samson might be laughing somewhere in a cantina with him, bending an elbow at a bar.

Except for Johnny Blue.

Johnny crouched and hated himself. Marky had been right. El Camino Real had been unlucky for her husband. Why hadn't Johnny taken her advice, and Brad's, and told the two of them to cut for home pronto?

In the distance in one of the missions Johnny heard the idiotic giggle of a cheap dame being taken by some gassed-up mattress jockey in from the stews of Hollywood for a good time in the exotic confines of Joel Salinas' gambling and whoring paradise.

Somehow that giggle was a fitting coda to a somber and depressing movement.

MISSION SAN BUENAVENTURA was as dark as a sack of black cats and as still as a muted horn. Johnny tapped on the slammer softly, calling, "Marky." There was no answer. He tapped again, louder, "Marky."

He heard some stirring sounds inside. He had a vision of Marky's sturdy dusky figure walking barefoot across to the door. It was the kind of a picture that would have awakened pleasurable connotations at any other time.

"*Que pasa?*"

"It's Johnny. Let me in."

"Johnny Blue? I'm not dressed, Johnny." Marky's voice had the shakes.

"Open the door. It's important."

The door opened and Johnny stepped in. A lamp blazed up, and he saw Marky standing there in a long white nightshirt and bare feet, her eyes round, staring up at him. He noted she had nail polish on her toenails, a rich crimson.

"Sit down, Marky," he said.

She stared at him curiously a moment, frowning. Then, seeing how serious he was, she nodded. "Okay, Johnny." She padded obediently to the rumpled bed and sat down.

"*De qué se trata?*"

Johnny watched her carefully. "You'd better get a tight grip on yourself."

She stared at him, her brown eyes wide and alert now.

"I thought you'd like to hear it from me, Marky, and not from the law."

Her eyes went wild with terror for one frozen instant.

"The law! *La policía?*"

"Brad's been hurt," Johnny said tightly. "Hurt damned bad. He got hit on the highway by a car and he's in serious trouble."

"Hurt! *Un accidente!*" Marky stared, and then went numb, stunned. But somehow she did not seem to be

surprised. She could have known it all along. That was what her eyes said.

Marky's eyes narrowed. "You are sure, Johnny, that it is an accident? You are sure it is not—how you say in English, *una treta*?—a trick? On purpose?"

"What makes you think it might be a scheme, Marky?"

She avoided his eyes. "No reason, Johnny. It is nothing. Do not pay attention to me. It must be an accident."

"But what was he doing out on the highway?" Johnny asked. "Did you see him at all after we finished the stand tonight?"

Marky shuddered, her shoulders suddenly shaking, her whole body trembling uncontrollably. "We are going away," she said. "It is all arranged. And then he comes to me and he says to me the plans are changed. We stay at El Camino Real, he tell me."

She put her head down in her hands, sobbing.

"Did he tell you where he was going after the chaser?" Johnny asked.

Marky did not look up. Her voice came out between sniffs and sobs. "For *el paseo*. For the walk, Johnny."

"Did you have a fight?"

"No fight." The words said no, but the voice said yes.

"What was the reason you had to leave El Camino Real so quickly, Marky? Can't you tell me now? Now that Brad's hurt?"

"I do not want to stay," she murmured, keeping her eyes averted. "No other reason, Johnny."

She was lying. There was no doubt of that. Maybe this was no accident. Maybe someone wanted to hit Brad Samson. Johnny frowned. "Was Brad in trouble, Marky? With the law?"

"*El policía*? No, Johnny! Nothing like that!"

Johnny watched her bleakly. "And you, Marky? What about you? Are you in trouble with the law? Did somebody try to hurt him to get at you?"

Marky sat on the bed, her eyes wet and teary. She was past the point of sobbing anymore. She was empty.

"You make him stay, Johnny. You make him be hurt."

He moved to her and grasped her smooth shoulders. Her skin made his fingers tingle. She was fleshy and young and vibrant and the blood ran hot in her.

She writhed out of his hands, the nightshirt pulling tight against her uptilted breasts.

"Marky," he said. "You ever been here before? At El Camino Real? Answer me!"

"No!" cried Marky, looking down. "These places are no good. The gambling. *Los naipes*—how you say?—the cards! I do not want for to stay here. It is why I wanted to go away!"

Johnny regarded her stonily. "Yeah?"

"Sí, Johnny."

"Okay, Marky. What else can I say? I'm sorry. They've taken Brad to the County Hospital. He's still unconscious."

Marky blinked her eyes. "He says *nada* since he is hit by the car?"

Johnny shook his head, watching her closely. "Nothing."

She breathed a sigh of relief. Her eyes darted to Johnny's face and then she looked away quickly.

She knew, Johnny thought. Damn her! She knew! And for some reason, for some crazy scared reason in that closed-up, tight little peasant brain, she did not intend for him to know. Damn her!

"All right," Johnny said, standing up wearily. "You can stay here until he's out of the woods." Johnny's lips turned down bitterly. "If he gets out. Salinas says he'll foot the bill. You stay and wait for him. Okay?"

"Okay, Johnny," she whispered, staring at the floor.

He got up and strode to the door. He opened it and turned around. "And Marky."

"Yes, Johnny?" She looked up at him.

"When you decide to tell me about it, I'll be listening with both ears."

She closed her eyes and moved her lips slightly as if she were praying. Then she stood up and twisted the nightshirt about her body tightly. He saw her breasts and her hips and her thighs and the gentle tapering of her waist. And as she stood there in her bare feet, she was all woman. She was what woman had always been on this earth. She was flesh and blood and emotion. And she watched him under her lowered lids.

Johnny knew as he stared at her that whatever she knew she would never tell him. She was a desolate and lonely

little girl behind the grown-up façade, and she knew things that frightened her. And she would never reveal these things to a stranger like Johnny Blue.

Never in a million years.

Leave her to the law, Johnny thought. They'll belt it out of her stubborn little body. And he walked out into the moonlit night, into the cool breeze and the smell of sagebrush.

Behind him Markey stood a long time listening to his footsteps receding in the darkness. At last the tears began streaming soundlessly out of her eyes and down her cheeks and into her mouth.

2.

As he walked along the trail back to the *posada*, the thought struck Johnny that it would almost be impossible for a man to be cut down on a highway accidentally with the whole countryside flooded in the light of a full moon.

He shrugged and tried to get the sour used-up feeling out of his mouth. He moved faster and was almost running when he got to the patio wall that led into the back of the *posada*.

Joel Salinas had already called in the County Sheriff from Cholla City, the County Seat. The ambulance had carried what was left of Brad Samson to the County Hospital a full hour ago.

Salinas was in his office cursing and muttering about the bad publicity in the Cholla City newspaper. Cholla City was the nearest town to El Camino Real, and it housed both the Sheriff of the County and the newspaper. There was an undeclared war raging continually between Salinas' gambling operation here and the city government.

"Well, the hell with them," Salinas muttered, glaring darkly at Johnny Blue, as if it had been Johnny's fault Brad had been struck by the hit-and-run driver.

Holly Salinas walked into the office and nodded briefly to Johnny. "Sorry about Brad's accident."

Johnny nodded. "Thanks to you two for letting Mrs. Samson stay on until we get something worked out."

Holly spread her hands eloquently. "No trouble at all, Johnny."

Johnny watched Holly's eyes. He remembered with a brief stirring of uneasiness that Holly had been quite interested in Brad Samson's affairs. Perhaps she was just as interested, perhaps more so, in Brad Samson the man.

Johnny resolved to try to find out more about Holly one of these nights.

One of these nights, real soon.

3.

At one-thirty in the morning Johnny was sitting in the all-night coffee shop in the *posada* nursing a cup of hot mud and waiting for the arrival of the sheriff when Roxie Hall walked in and sat down beside him at the counter.

"Hi," she said, bright as a button.

Johnny gave her a dubious look. So much had gone down the drain since he had last talked to her that she seemed to belong somewhere in another world.

"Where the hell have you been?" he asked.

She frowned at him. "Who do you think you are talking like that? Part owner of me?" Then her eyes softened. "I've been taking a walk in the moonlight."

"That's a marvelous coincidence."

"What do you mean?"

"Brad Samson was out taking a moonlight walk, too. He was run over by a car. He's seriously injured. He almost cashed in. As it is, he'll never blow a horn again in his life."

Her hand flew to her face. Her eyes went sick. "Oh, God." She put her hand over his, to grab something real in this suddenly nightmarish world. "No wonder you gave me that look. I'm so sorry, Johnny. Terribly, terribly sorry."

"That doesn't help Brad."

"How is his wife taking it?"

"Like Lee took Washington. She isn't."

"You had a brawl with him tonight, didn't you?" Roxie's eyes were sharp.

"Yeah. Brad wanted to leave the band. I told him he couldn't. Marky thinks it's my fault he's hurt."

Roxie studied a moment. She sighed. "What about the band?"

"I'll phone the San Diego local and get some pickup horn. Won't be hard," Johnny said bitterly. "There is no essential man in a good dance combo."

Roxie's eyes suddenly looked anguished. "Don't knock yourself out, Johnny. It's not your fault."

Johnny shook his head. "I should have let him go."

Her hand was on his arm. "How could you know this was going to happen?"

He turned to brush her hand off him angrily, and he was going to phrase something brutal about the fact that no dame was going to soap opera him into forgetting so soon, when he saw her eyes.

She had been trying to soothe him, and she herself was falling apart inside. Her eyes were brimming with tears, and here she was telling him not to worry. Here she was carrying them both, as strong and tough as steel, while Johnny Blue was crying in his cup of mud, feeling real sorry for himself, on a big blues kick.

His hands went to her shoulders, and then she was nestled against his arm, and the two of them felt pretty silly sitting on the stools at the counter. But she let him prop her up, and she went to pieces in his arms, sobbing and weeping uncontrollably for a brief moment.

The girl behind the counter watched nervously and then she went back in the kitchen to think up something to do out of sight.

"Roxie," Johnny said, all soft and gone inside. His hand came up behind her head and touched her hair. Until this moment he had not realized how solidly put together this long blonde girl was, and now he felt the strong thrust of her breasts against his chest, and the long firm feel of her thigh against his, and her tear-streaked face was hard against his cheek.

He turned aside and kissed her at first as a friendly, brotherly gesture. And then when her soft cool lips answered his, he felt himself amazed that he had never done this before to her, for now it was so obvious that this long blue-eyed girl was the best thing in the world for him.

She clung to him tightly and her shuddering ceased, and he felt her come alive against him, so much so that they almost fell off the stools.

It was all over in an instant, like the abrupt cessation of a hurricane, and she turned to stone in his arms, her lips pulled away, and she slid off the stool to fuss with some gadget on her dress. Her eyes avoided him.

"Roxie," he said, standing beside her, moving his arms around her again. "What a crazy thing."

She stood off from him, her face white, her eyes sick. "No, Johnny."

"You're nuts, Roxie! Why, the two of us—!"

"Don't ever ask me why, Johnny, but it's no go. It's impossible." Her eyes came up, tired, helpless.

He was through playing with words. He took her in his arms, and kissed her. He kissed a tiger. She slapped him with a vicious flat slap of her lovely tanned hand and he backed away. She reached the door where she waited for him. Johnny called the girl in from the kitchen and paid his check while he still eyed Roxie. He was both amazed and puzzled. Sometime he was going to find out exactly what made this chick operate, and then. . . .

Outside the *posada* he saw the sheriff's station wagon drive up. It said "Cholla City Sheriff's Office" on the side. A lean, sun-beaten, battle-scarred man whose snapbrim hat was out of character, but whose teeth-clamped cigarillo was not, emerged and walked swiftly into Salinas' office.

"See you, Roxie," Johnny said, opening the café door for her.

"No. I'll come with you."

He looked at her a moment. She had her annoying habits, like turning into a tiger on cue but, then again, she had some good points, too—for instance, knowing when she was needed.

4.

Sheriff Dustin Storm had appropriated Joel Salinas' office upstairs and, as Johnny and Roxie climbed the big stairs and entered the corridor, they saw him standing at the door, looking out. As Johnny approached, the Sheriff took out a dirty brown cigarillo and cut off the end of it with his pen knife. He was lighting it as Johnny walked over to him and asked:

"Is it all over?"

As if he were a carny weight-guesser; Sheriff Storm looked Johnny up and down and then he looked at Roxie Hall as if he were a stockman sizing up a prize heifer. Finally he said in a drawl, "No, amigo. It's only beginning."

Dustin Storm looked as if he might have been left at birth on the desert to be whelped by the wolves, at which point he had dedicated the rest of his life to getting even with the human race for his not being a wolf. He was whipcord tough, leathery, his eyes black as feeding flies, and the least emotional man Johnny had ever seen. Sheriff Storm was as dried out as a chunk of lava rock. Vinegar and battery acid ran through his veins. Where his heart should have been an IBM machine sorted out wanted cards.

Johnny took a deep breath. "Brad Samson was my trumpet player. I've known him for years. How is he?"

Sheriff Storm turned those black eyes on Johnny again, studying him carefully, tracing his family line back through eight generations.

"He's still out cold," the sheriff remarked quietly. "But I guess you know that, amigo. He was hit by a car while taking a midnight stroll on the highway." He glanced at Roxie Hall and shifted his cigarillo to the other side of his mouth. "Interesting thing. Before the car got him, somebody else had a go at him, too."

Johnny's eyes widened. "Say that again, sheriff!"

Storm narrowed his eyes against the smoke of the cigarillo. He shifted his gaze to Roxie, and then back to Johnny.

"I said, before the car got him, somebody else tried to. Brad Samson was worked over with a blunt instrument. What I'm saying, the long and the short of it, as it were: Brad Samson was bludgeoned before he was run down by the car. I doubt if he even felt the car when it hit him."

Johnny stood there frozen for about half a minute. So did Roxie. The sheriff looked at the two of them, shifting his dark black eyes from one to the other, and then he grinned and backed into Josef Salinas' office, moving about as if he owned it. He blew some of the foul cigarillo smoke

about the room, to fumigate it, maybe, and then he sat down at the desk and began studying some papers.

Johnny looked through the half open door at the lean, leathery-faced man.

"Bludgeoned," Johnny whispered incredulously as he turned to Roxie Hall. "Who would do a thing like that?"

For once, Roxie's eyes did not meet his.

"And why, Roxie?"

"It doesn't make sense, does it?" she asked. But somehow it seemed to Johnny that it did make sense to Roxie. It seemed to him that Roxie knew a lot more about Brad Samson's troubles than she had let on. It seemed an odd coincidence that Roxie Hall should have signed on with the combo on the very day three strange things had happened. On the day Marky had got the big jitters, Brad and Johnny had had their first fist fight, and Brad Samson had stumbled into a blunt instrument and a speeding car in the brightness of the full moon.

That had been a very odd coincidence.

And a not very pleasant one.

5.

Fifteen minutes later Sheriff Dustin Storm called Johnny Blue into Joel Salinas' office. Storm was alone in there, messing around with some papers. He pointed to a chair opposite the desk. Johnny sat in it, noticing as he did so he was placed directly under the light, a perfect target for a third degree.

Storm flipped some sheets of paper about and then his black eyes drifted up and slashed Johnny Blue's face up and down and sideways.

"Well, amigo," he drawled, "I got a tin ear, so don't play none of them sad songs for me." He grinned disarmingly, and stuck out his hand. "I'm Dustin Storm. Call me Dusty. Dusty Storm, get it?"

He leaned back and laced his fingers around the bullet he called a head.

"Well, laugh, amigo."

Johnny laughed.

"This Brad Samson. Your friend. He have any enemies who'd like to see him take the big sleep?"

Obviously Storm believed in the blunt, bulldozer approach.

Johnny shook his head. "No idea."

Storm's feeding fly eyes were piercing. "You got anything to do with this 'accident,' Blue?" The lips twisted in a smile. The cigarillo smoke rolled up in front of the lean sour man.

"I've got nothing to do with this mess," Johnny snapped, suddenly very angry.

Storm's eyes lighted up. "On the one hand, amigo, what you say is true. On your hand. On the other hand, on the hand of one *portero* in the *letrina*, one janitor in the john, the story is different. He wants me a song about a fight between Brad Samson and you. You recollect?" The lips smiled, the cigarillo rolled about the smoke rose. "What's your version, amigo?"

Containing his temper as best he could, Johnny gave Storm a blow by blow description of the fight in the john, describing especially the highhanded manner in which Joel Salinas' bouncers had come in and broken up the argument. Storm sat there as enigmatic as a Buddha and, when Johnny was done, he nodded his head and spoke in a very pleasant, honeyed voice:

"You think maybe this Roxie Hall had a go at your friend Brad Samson?"

Johnny's lips tightened. "I'd say no."

"Oh. That's such a neat pair of stems between her and the ground. This little princess couldn't possibly do anything savoring even mildly of evil. Could she, amigo?"

Johnny flushed. "You through grilling me?"

Storm obviously wasn't. "This Marky. The little spitfire. You think she tried to fade her beloved husband?"

"No!" Johnny all but shouted, realizing as he heard his voice rise that he was obviously overcompensating for his own shaky suspicions. He bit his lip.

"How about the boys in the band?" the sheriff asked.

"None of them," Johnny growled. "Else why didn't they try sooner? We've been together for some time now."

Storm shrugged. "Merely asking, amigo. You suspect anybody, Johnny?"

It was the first time the black-eyed man with the soft,

lazy, coiled-up, waiting voice had called him by his first name. Johnny glanced up. "No."

Storm smiled lazily, holding the cigarillo down below the level of the table so that no smoke rose between them.

"You bludgeon him, Johnny?"

"No!"

Storm nodded with a sigh. He lipped the cigarillo and brooded at the ceiling.

"Somebody did. He's damned near dead, that one. Man don't just grow that way," Storm murmured.

Johnny said nothing.

"First beating we've had around Cholla City since Depression days when one of them Okies got pushed out of a pear tree." The black eyes glistened. "City padres ain't going to like this one bit. Bad for business. Joel Salinas is madder than a wet Rhode Island Red. But that don't alter the fact there's been a near killing."

Storm beat at the desk top with his doubled-up fist.

"Go home, amigo! Bed down. You got a big day tomorrow." Storm looked milder. "Who you got lined up to take over that lead horn?"

Johnny's eyes narrowed. This coot knew more about the band business than he pretended. Tin ear, hell!

"Some pickup sideman from the San Diego local," Johnny said.

Storm nodded. Then he leaned forward. "*Uno momento*, amigo. A word of advice. I wouldn't go near Cholla City. They don't like musicians and gamblers and the El Camino Real bunch."

"You think one of them had at Brad?"

Storm stood up and shook hands solemnly with Johnny, ignoring the question. "Adios, Johnny. Sweet music."

"Sweet hunting, sheriff."

Storm's eyes glittered.

5

NEXT MORNING the San Diego local sent out a horn man named Pats Spivak, a fair lip. Pats specialized in Dirty Blues leads. Johnny rummaged up some old blues

arrangements he had done long ago, and he let the boys dust them off. Surprisingly enough, the results were not too bad. Ambles Bennett, the guitar player, was in his element, and Johnny put him up close to the milks on a milking stool, and let him bleed the wires for a few hot rides. Roxie Hall oozed sex and sarvy in the blues numbers. Johnny was amazed—she was so much better than he had thought she could be.

"Put in an echo chamber and a couple automobile horns," said Andy Orr, "and we can start to wax a few."

Fats drained the spit out of his horn. He looked dreamy. "Might cut a few sides at that. The blues may be coming back." Then he laughed, and his stomach bounced up and down. "I been saying that for twenty years, boys. I'm down in a hole with it, all alone."

They broke up and Johnny went over to the mission for a flop. His particular cottage was called San Luis Obispo de Tolosa. As he lay there on his cot he could hear in the vague distance the guitar whanging of Ambles Bennett. Ambles was playing an old range lament that Johnny had heard once in a Montana tank town.

*Ten thousand goddamn cattle,
They left my range and rambled away.*

*Sons of bitches,
Is what I say.*

*Lone man,
Dead broke,
Today.*

*And my gal, she's gone away,
Left my shack and rambled away,
With a son-of-a-bitch
From loway.*

*Lone man,
Dead broke,
Today.*

*In gambling hells delaying,
Ten thousand cattle,
Goddamned cattle, straying, straying,*

*Lone man,
Dead broke,
Today.*

Johnny grinned and dozed. In a half world somewhere

he heard Ambles Bennett pulling the strings again, singing a lonely, slow-moving blues moan in the traditional twelve-bar pattern, making it up as he went along, the way they did down on the levees, in the cotton fields, in the jails:

Met a gal and her name was Roxie Hall;

Met a gal and her name was Roxie Hall.

Roxie was a gal make a three-foot man feel tall.

Loved a gal, and her name was Roxie Hall;

Loved a gal, and her name was Roxie Hall.

But she loved money, and nothing else at all.

Roxie met a guy named Johnny Blue;

Roxie met a guy named Johnny Blue.

He had money—but he was in love with it, too.

Saddest story that ever has been told;

Saddest story that ever has been told.

Ever-lovin' couple, cheatin' each other for gold.

Johnny had to laugh at Ambles and the tune, and before he knew it he was sound asleep.

2.

The Cholla City newspaper, *The Cactus*, had played up the Brad Samson incident big. That night Johnny saw Joel Salinas preening his razor's edge mustache and aching ecstatically over the gold flooding El Camino Real's coffers. But the minute he saw Johnny he put on a sanctimonious air and his eyelids drooped in false mourning for Brad Samson. Johnny felt like smacking the satanic boniface silly across his filthy little Hitler mustache.

Blue climbed on deck and diddled the joybox proper through the first half of the Saturday night stand. The joint really rocked; it was packed to the rafters. The publicity had whetted the appetites of the Cholla City citizens. Johnny felt like hitting Salinas for a fat raise but he held off. Maybe later.

He had not seen Marky all day but he did know the news from the County Hospital was not good. Brad was still unconscious, though he was apparently going to recover. There was no doubt, however about the fact that the medics did not like the slow way Brad was responding.

Meanwhile, there was nothing to do but wait.

But Marky, Johnny saw, wasn't waiting exactly the way a good wife should. She was out there on the dance floor juking with a fresh-faced kid, Marky. And she had never danced with anyone but Brad.

Who the dickens was she shoeing around with? Johnny wondered. He didn't make the face. It looked like one of the mob of Cholla City ghouls who had come out to view the scene of Brad's bad accident.

Then, to Johnny's shock, he saw the kid haul Marky to the bar. Johnny got up.

"Ambles," he whispered to the guitar man, "front for me a minute. I've got to go out."

Ambles nodded and took over the band. Roxie Hall raised her brows at Johnny but she said nothing.

Johnny moved into the bar and saw Marky seated at a table with a pimple-faced, skinny, blond kid. Mr. Blue maneuvered behind them but he could hear only a few blurred words. Marky, who never drank, was making a creditable attempt at becoming plastered.

Johnny placed a hand on Marky's shoulder. "Marky," he said, almost in a fatherly tone.

Marky looked around belligerently, her eyes foggy. "I do not like *cabrones* who handle me," she said thickly. "Oh, it's you, Johnny." She scowled, trying to make out why he was there. Unable to come to any conclusion, she just glowered.

The blond kid stood up bravely, weaving. "Well, well, it's the pie-anner player himself!" he sneered. "What the hell's the matter with you, pie-anner player? Get back on your seat there and rattle them keys! Rattle them ivories, man! Rattle 'em real reet!"

Johnny put out his palm and shoved. The kid went over backwards, taking the chair with him and pulling down the adjoining table. Johnny seized Marky by the shoulders and lifted her bodily out of the chair.

In a moment he had her in the fresh air. He dragged her toward the fountain in the patio and shoved her head in it. Then he pulled her upright. She stood there, swaying, swearing in Spanish, spitting and blinking.

"Get back to your room," he said severely. "If I see you in that creep joint again, I'll put you over my knee!"

She could hardly see him, but her hand came up from her feet somewhere and she slapped him loudly and ferociously across the cheek. The blow staggered him.

But the dip in the drink had sobered Marky. She went stomping off into the night weaving a little, headed for Mission San Buenaventura. Johnny thought about wearing a fencing mask the next time he talked to a woman, but he had to dismiss the idea on the ground that such protection would have taken all the spice out of his encounters.

He went back to the bar where the blond kid was still pulling chairs erect and trying to figure out what had happened.

Johnny said, "Excuse me, son, but that girl is not for you. Just choose yourself another one."

"Gee mister," said the scared, blond boy. "I didn't pick her—she picked me! Lordy, if I'd known she was your wife, I wouldn't have ever danced with her."

3.

Johnny played through the second half, worried. There was no telling now what Marky might do. The first thing after the chaser, Johnny went down to Mission San Buenaventura, to check on her and to apologize for dunking her in the fountain.

He found the front door open. He raced into the house and snapped on the light. The place was a shambles. Marky had packed in a furious hurry. She had tried to stuff everything she owned into one suitcase. Then she had emptied the suitcase and repacked only the essentials.

His anxiety mounting, Johnny shut off the lights and ran back to the *posada*. He looked at the register but Marky had not bothered to check out. She had just gone. Johnny stood undecided. There was no way to go to Cholla City except by cab. Except, he thought suddenly, by way of one of the Cholla City patrons who might have given her a ride.

Then he knew why she had latched onto the pimply blond boy. She had wanted to get out of here and into town. And by now, Johnny guessed, she must have gone.

Johnny walked out to the parking lot.

"Hello, Mr. Blue," said the attendant. "Say, I sure like

the way the band is shaping up. Those blues are the nuts."

"Thanks, friend. I've got a favor to ask."

"Do what I can, Mr. Blue."

"Brad Samson's wife. Have you seen her?"

"Terrible thing, that Samson affair. Now he was what I call a top trumpet man. A real frantic harr."

"His wife—did you see her?"

"Tiny little girl, kind of dark? Yeah, I think I seen her shoving off tonight with a guy."

Johnny gripped the attendant's arm. "You sure?"

The attendant fumbled with the check stub. "Sure. Take a look at that license number on the check. Means the registration's around here somewhere. Probably a Cholla City car."

"May I have that?"

"Sure. You looking for her? I think she's left, Mr. Blue. She was all packed up."

But Johnny was already in his Jaguar and starting it up.

4.

There were three hotels in Cholla City, one Grade A, one Grade B and the third one gamey. Johnny figured Marky would be at the third; any citizen of Cholla City would pick that spot to be out of the limelight.

It was a sagging, bowed-in monstrosity called the "Seabreeze." Any real seabreeze that hit it would have sent it tumbling down like a politician's promise. The windows drooped like hung-over eyes, and the outside had seen its last paint job in Tom Sawyer's day. It smelled of stale beer, rotten bread and mouldy apple pie.

As Johnny parked the Jaguar, he saw what he was looking for: a Chevy with the car plate number the attendant had given him. He glanced at the registration sheet on the steering post and went into the Seabreeze's rickety foyer.

He banged the bell. A frowzy middle-aged woman answered, coming up out of the pages of a confession magazine. It was apparent she had never had the opportunity to make one herself.

"Mr. Buace," Johnny said succinctly.

The woman fumbled over the register. "No Bunce here," she said with finality.

"No? That's what it says on the steering post of his car," said Johnny, indicating the Chevvy parked out front.

The woman peered drowsily out the sagging doorway. "Oh, him. Mr. Smith. John Smith. He's in 302." The woman looked up at Johnny. "With Pocahantas," she added with glee.

Johnny said, "Thanks," and he was already at the stairs.

"Hey, wait a minute!" the woman crowed. "Maybe they don't want visitors!"

Johnny ate up the stairs to the third floor, 302. He rattled the knob, pushed it open.

There was Marky sitting up in bed. Beside the bed, standing with a bleared expression on his sozzled face, was a hefty middle-aged man with a misunderstood look and a prosperous appearance. The only thing that kept him from turning and running like a jackrabbit out the door was the fact that he had his clothes draped over the chair.

So, instead of running, John Smith blustered and bumbled. Marky looked scared. She started to pull the dirty sheets up over her head.

"See here, mister," blubbered Cholla City's A Number 1 Citizen. "What do you mean, busting in here like this?"

Johnny strode across the room and lifted the man up to him by his skin. "Beat it, John Smith. I ought to punch your nose for messing around with this girl."

The outraged A Number 1 citizen, seeing that Johnny was not going to tear him limb from limb as he had feared, gained a modicum of Dutch courage. "Well, then, I think I ought to punch yours!"

Johnny decided it was too late to reason. He smashed John Smith back against the wall and the man slumped on the floor.

But the blow sobered him and he came roaring to his feet, his face red with anger. The mouse had turned into a lion. He clipped Johnny a vicious one along the side

of the jaw, trying for a spectacular movie knock-out, and then he went for Johnny's stomach.

Johnny pushed him away. The man came in again, smashing Johnny into the wall. Johnny tripped and went down. But John Smith had underestimated his own inebriation and he fell over the edge of the bed.

Johnny picked him up and heaved him toward the door. John Smith bounced a few times, reeling against the door jamb. He sagged there, bleeding and forlorn. Johnny flung his pants and coat to him.

John Smith stepped into his pants in the open doorway. He watched Johnny warily as he did so.

"I'll remember that face, mister," he said thickly, "and the next time I see it, I'll alter it free of charge!"

"See that you do," Johnny said, and slammed the door in the man's flushed face. Then he turned and looked at the bed where Murky sat, white-faced and staring in terror at Johnny Blue.

"I—I have to *vamos* from that place, Johnny," she said in a small, wheedling voice. "You do not help me, and I do the next best thing."

She turned on the tears. It was easy. This time she was really frightened. Johnny walked over to the bed and sat down beside her.

He sighed. "Marky, I guess I can't make you stay out there if you don't want to. But won't you take some money to tide you over?"

The tears fled. The fear vanished. She turned her brown, warm, lovely eyes on Johnny Blue, and she sobbed once, convincingly. Then she nodded her head with a glad smile.

"I—oh, Johnny—you *maravilloso hombre!* Señor wonderful!" A vague thought of her husband intruded and her face altered. "Si, of course. You do it for Brad. But I want you to know I always think you are El Tops with me!"

Johnny felt sick. He pulled a tight roll out of his pocket and peeled off a few cabbage leaves. He balled them on the dresser and turned to go.

She was there at the door ahead of him, standing in her old-fashioned, knee-length nightshirt. He could see the soft lumps of her little brown body and he could see

the look in her face. She had suddenly become a woman again, not the scared, frightened creature she had been.

"Johnny," she said, pressing close to him.

Sickened, he pulled away, holding her at arm's length. He thought of Brad, and he thought of the way Brad loved this girl, and he thought about men and women in general, and the thought was not pleasant.

"You do not make me return to El Camino Real?" she whispered, her fingers straying over his jawline, his cheek, his chin.

He shook his head numbly.

"I am lonely here, Johnny. Perhaps you can keep me company until it is time for you to go back tomorrow."

He thought desperately, trying to execute a plan for a graceful retreat, but the old song and dance about his friendship for Brad was no good now, and he could not argue she needed some consoling after the accident of her husband.

Frankly, the absolutely bald ruthlessness of her attack staggered him, vanquished him.

She was in his arms now and, unlike the other time, this time he did not seem able to protest her need, and he could feel the smooth flesh against him under the thin granddaddy's night shirt she was wearing.

He had one last desperate thought of Brad, and then she was in his arms, and her soft, velvety lips were tight to his, and she was pressing that body close to him, and it seemed to him that something had to give.

He might as well relax and enjoy it.

6

CHOLLA CITY started out in the old days as a cowtown, but pretty soon the cows ran out and it became a tank town on the railroad from San Diego to Los Angeles. Finally the railroads had it, the commercial airplanes took over and Cholla City got into the act again assembling the newfangled things. In 1980, when the jets go, maybe the town will build rockets.

Anyway, it was a community that always landed on its feet. So did its citizens. Sometimes they landed on somebody else's feet. Like Johnny Blue's.

It was a one-street town, the *calle mayor*, as it is called in Spanish, as wide as a football field, the way most Western towns are, with low buildings lining each side and cars parked at an angle to the curb.

Cholla City washed itself now, gave itself a dose of cologne to make itself smell sweet and never went around with its nose shiny. Those adolescent days were done. The citizens were middle-aged, conservative, stuffy and self-satisfied. Half-hipped but dicty, as the hard boys would say. Unsophisticated but snooty.

Johnny saw all this through a pair of rose-colored eyes early in the morning as he saddled a counter stool at the "Excelsior Eats." He fumbled for change to catch the Sunday copy of the Cholla City Cactus, and leafed through the bad news.

The jovial short order man brought him his dirty mud and Johnny tried to wrap himself around it and wake up.

He read a dull editorial titled, "On Your Way, Bums!" which some cowtown Walter Lippmann had written about Johnny and his sidemen. The logic of the treatise was incredible: Brad Samson was a bandman; he was beaten up; people who are beaten up are usually hanging around other crooks; therefore all bandmen are crooks; get the bums out of here.

Johnny threw down the rag with a groan. He gulped the coffee and his mind slowly let down the iron curtains. He thought of Marky, and he growled big. She had left. Sometime in the early hours of morning she had crept out of the fleabag called the Seabreeze and she had flown like a big bird. Naturally she had taken the money Johnny left for her. She had scrawled a note: "Don't follow me. Thanks loads. Marky."

The short order man brought a big plate of steaming scrambled eggs, potatoes and toast and set it in front of Johnny. The thought of all this mess gagged him but he steeled himself, thought about vitamins and plunged in. Ten minutes later he felt like a new man; if not a better one, at least a fresh one.

He stepped out into the cool early morning sunlight.

Cholla City suddenly looked like Shangrila. The buildings were fresh. The people looked friendly. Not one dog snapped at him. If there had been a policeman on the beat Johnny felt sure the cop would have nodded, tapped his cap with his night stick and said with a thick peat-bog brogue, "And a cheery good morning to ye, sair!"

In reality, all that happened was a fly sat on Johnny's chin and rubbed its hands together as it considered those scrambled egg leavings. Johnny slapped it off, mentally withdrawing all blanket offers of camaraderie.

2.

He climbed into the Jaguar, did a double take and looked more closely at the person seated in it. He had seen her there from the sidewalk and had given her plenty of time to evaporate if she were a mirage. But she was no mirage. Perhaps she was in the wrong car. If so, she should have noticed it by now.

But there she anchored, looking at him with her bullet-gray, squint-lidded eyes.

"Well?" said Johnny, surveying her closer.

"Well," said the girl. "So you're Johnny Blue."

Johnny said, "It doesn't even make a good song title. Try another."

"No hurry. I have all day," said the girl. She beamed back insolently, her hand resting on the back of the seat. She closed her eyes and let the fresh sun bathe her.

"I don't," said Johnny. "Shall we dance? Shall we sing? What's your line?"

"Just start driving, Mr. Blue," said the girl bluntly. "I shall think about what I have been entrusted to say and when it forms in my mind I shall say it. You go straight on with your driving."

Johnny wanted to say, "Drop dead," but he knew if he said it in Cholla City he'd be arrested for compounding a felony. He buttoned his lip. He said, "Hang on to your hat. Here we go."

He pulled the Jag out of the curb and sailed through town in the direction of El Camino Real. While he was driving he studied the flip chick more closely.

She was that long-stemmed variety that sadly does not

have too much meat on its frame. The frame in this case was upholstered in a fashion, but not very skillfully. She was a trifle flat-chested, a tragedy in our culture, but she had made no attempt to compensate for nature's shortcomings with substitutes. Johnny gave her an A for that, anyway.

She had long, slim hands, almost bony. Her elbows were smooth, but knobby. She wore purple lipstick and very little face powder, and she had several freckles. Her legs were good but strictly for walking. Underneath the squinch lids her eyes were gray, but it was hard to see them. They were usually peering out through narrow slits. They had a lot of life to them, though.

Not a red hot item, Johnny figured, and yet, for some unaccountable reason, Johnny got a flash that she went around stirring up trouble with men as an habitual thing. It was these long, tough kinds that were likely to give a man considerable trouble.

Her voice was a horse of another complexion. It was soft, well-mannered and cultured. She had been somewhere to have the nasal drawl hammered out, the colloquial kinks removed. Her clothes smelled collegiate: foot-sweater, skirt, low socks, a ribbon in the dishwater hair.

Johnny said, "Vassar, I'll bet."

The girl stirred. "H'm?"

"No. Bryn Mawr."

The girl frowned. "Which means?"

"Mrs. Peabody's School for Wayward Nymphs?"

The girl giggled. "Mills," she said. "California."

"Been out long?"

"Long enough."

"Long enough to what?"

"Find out what I was missing."

"They must teach a dinger of a course in reputation at dear old Mills."

She opened one eye, "floor." She closed it.

"What's your name—Giggles?"

She yawned. "Monica Stone. Naturally they called me Stone-Face."

"You sure that's what the boys called you?"

Monica sat up, blinking from the sun. "What the dirty

old boys called me is none of your damned business, Mr. Blue."

"I don't sing songs, you know, Stone's-Throw, if that's what you came along to hear."

"Thank god. I'm sure your voice is your least asset."

"Please watch your language, Miss."

She giggled again. "My first big job. I just don't know where to begin."

Johnny sighed. "Monica, you're a good kid, but honestly, honey, you keep talking and nothing comes out. As we say in the music world, here we are, nowhere."

"All right, it's like this. I work for Gus Deane, president of the Cholla City Chamber of Commerce."

Johnny groaned. "God."

"That's right. He is Cholla City's leading citizen. Has been for years. It says here. He runs the bank."

"I like the company he keeps. Go on."

"We've been keeping our little town here pretty darned clean, Mr. Blue, and so we don't like people like you coming in and cluttering it up with call girls and hit-and-run victims and stuff like that-there." Monica giggled. "Sound all right? I took it off Mr. Deane's tape recorder, almost verbatim."

"We'll put it to music, add a fireball and sell it to Spike Jones."

Monica went into an imitation of a stiff-necked, stuffed-shirt citizen with the desperately clinging vestiges of a middlewest background. "Now, Mr. Blue, this is a free country and we're sure darned proud that it is, but that don't mean we're going to put up with shenanigans such as yours around here."

"Shenanigans," Johnny repeated. "Brad Samson's accident is a shenanigan?" He felt his anger rise. This comedy had about played its time.

Monica blinked. "Oh, no, Mr. Blue." She turned wide eyes on Johnny. They were wide but they were not innocent. "Not that at all."

"Then what? I've been to town exactly once and—"

Monica laughed. "And? That's it, Mr. Blue!"

Johnny felt his pulse speed up. His face reddened. He looked at Monica. "He sure works fast, that Gus Deane. He must have spies planted all over." Then Johnny saw

it. Bounce. John Smith. He had gotten to Deane in the wee small hours and spewed out his story of the siege at the Seabreeze.

Johnny nodded bitterly. "I suppose I'm outlawed from town, huh?"

Monica shook her head. "No. Just stay clear of it, Mr. Blue."

"This is an ultimatum from higher headquarters?"

"Call it what you like. Personally, I'd call it an ultimatum." She was humming gaily.

"And if I don't? What then?"

Monica shrugged. "Then you don't, that's all." She laughed. "Isn't it silly? Imagine working at a job like mine." She watched him slyly.

"Why did he send you here? Why make a big thing of it? Why didn't he call me on the phone? Or hasn't he got that kind of money?"

Monica inspected her unpolished fingernails. "Oh, it was really my own idea, to deliver the message in person. Tête-à-tête, I guess."

"Oh, your idea," Johnny said.

"My idea." She drew a sample breath. "I would say I've been around a little bit, Mr. Blue. I like to make friends everywhere. I never knew a bandleader before. I like to find out about people. And things. You know?"

Her eyes regarded him narrowly through those squinch lids. Her lips were parted just enough. Her hand, on the back of the car seat, unaccountably touched his jacket. She stroked its surface absently, making love to the warps and woofs.

"Oh, I know," said Johnny. "Is it a horse trade? I mean, you let me have the key to the city and in return I dream up a few duets?"

She smiled sunnily. "Maybe. At least I'll try to help." Her hand moved to his neck. "About the other, there's plenty of time. Honestly, I just wanted you to know the rat was out." Her eyes gazed at him, the pupils small and intense. Some mal, thought Johnny.

Johnny shoved on the brakes and brought the Tag to a screeching standstill, the dust flaring up and over them like a cloud. He turned to her.

"Kid, you've been reading too many bad novels. All

bandsmen are not dissolute rakes interested only in rolling in the hay with each dame that appears in the barn. Bandsmen have wives. Some of them even have children. A few are human beings. Now why don't you get out of here like a good little girl and take a nice walk back into that stuffy, two-bit town of yours. Do you good. Get close to nature. Cool you off."

She stared at him, her chest moving up and down tightly. "You think you're so high and mighty! I've got something on you you'd love to know about. Before long you'll wish I was on your side of the ropes. You'll regret dumping me like this, Johnny Blue!" She spat the name out. Then she opened the door and climbed out. The Jaguar almost sighed with relief. "The good people of this town will ride you out on a rail!"

She stood glaring at him as he started the car up and sped off. Johnny could see her in the rear view mirror, a tiny absurd figure standing forlornly on the shoulder of the highway, staring after him in the hot glare of the desert sun.

He was getting mixed up with too many women, Johnny thought moodily. Why did women always hang around musicians? What was the fatal fascination exercised by a man who blew a horn, slapped a bass, or tortured a catgut string?

Johnny shrugged.

And turned around quickly in a swirling U-turn, drove back to the crazy little chick with the big eyes and took her to Cholla City in silence.

3.

That night Johnny Blue was the beneficiary of a good lesson in the ways and manners of Cholla City. Monica Stone had warned him he would go out of town on a rail. She should have said he would be lucky if the do-gooders of Cholla City confined themselves to a rail. There was almost the smell of tar brush and slitted pillow cases in the air.

It figured. The more conservative Cholla City citizens certainly had no use at all for Joel Salinas' El Camino Real. They stood stalwart and square against sin and evil,

which included fast gambling, call girls and all the other shady takedowns that went on at Salinas'.

It was not surprising that the Chamber of Commerce of Cholla City should make a concerted effort to strike back at El Camino Real. Johnny Blue was the red flag that set the bull roaring. He was a musician and musicians were notoriously fast-living and riotous. Johnny stood for all that was base in life, or at least so he seemed to the middle-of-the-roads who called Cholla City their pueblo.

They set out to nail him.

The first hint of trouble came when Roxie Hall tapped Johnny on the shoulder shortly after the first five-minute break.

"See you, Johnny?"

"Sure."

She led him out into the patio under the big pepper tree. "I think there's going to be a rumble tonight."

"A rumble?" Johnny repeated. "Who told you? Little bird?"

"Big bird," Roxie corrected. "I was sitting on one of those benches out of sight over there a while ago in that grove of piñon trees by Mission San Gabriel."

Johnny nodded. "So?"

"So two people came up and sat down. They didn't see me. They were yakking about the band. And from what I gathered they're going to try to break up the performance."

"When?" Johnny asked.

"Tonight. They're using that trick with the lemons—standing down front and sucking them near the horns."

"That old chestnut," sighed Johnny. "Haven't they got any imagination?"

"Will it work?"

"It's effective," Johnny admitted. "Are they teenagers, Roxie? Teenagers out for a ball?"

Roxie did not answer directly. "They're teenagers, all right. But I don't think they're for innocent fun, Johnny. Behind them I think there's some kind of a long-range sleigh ride backed by someone in Cholla City."

Johnny frowned. "I guess that's the way the knuckles crack. They've got solid stand-behind, Roxie. The Chamber of Commerce." Johnny laughed shortly. "Somebody's

trying damned hard to blast us out of here. I don't know exactly why. But I'd like to."

Roxie laid her hand on Johnny's sleeve. "Don't get burnt trying to put out a bonfire. Look what happened to Brad."

Johnny nodded. "I know. Thanks for worrying, anyway."

4.

The tip was no bum steer.

They were teenagers, all right, and tough ones. There were two of them at the start. The rest of them hung around the out-skirts, waiting for their cue. The two in the vanguard were the nastiest.

The first one was a heavily-muscled, wide-shouldered youth with an absurdly narrow waist. He wore a ducktailed haircut, flat sideburns and a cigarette back of his right ear. His pants were tight and pulled in at the ankles. He wore Brazilian flyer's boots.

The second one was a sleazy pimpled youth with buck teeth and bushy blond hair. He was built like a barrel of lard. He wore a ring of keys on a chain that hung from the thick double-width shell belt around trousers cut tight and tapered in at the ankles. His costume finished with hob-nailed boots.

The two youths established their beachhead in front of the podium about eleven o'clock and they took out thin lemon halves they began to suck noisily and lip-smackingly.

Johnny heard Fats Spivak lean forward and gently say, "Boys, can't you suck those lemons in private? I dearly love citrus fruit myself, but not when I'm working."

The two teeners could have been deaf for all the attention they paid to the horn man. They kept sucking their lemons as if they had not a care in the world. Not for a moment did they take their fishy eyes from Fats Spivak or Andy Orr. Fats turned to Johnny.

"Get these two clowns out of my hair, Johnny. My back teeth are floating. I can't blow note one."

Johnny stared a moment at the two trouble-makers but they paid him no heed. They were pros. Johnny had to step down from the bandstand and move in front of the

two youths. The very fact of his stepping down lost him any advantage he might have had standing on top of them.

The lemon-lovers did not look at him.

Johnny reached out and tapped one on the shoulder. This one rolled his eyes over toward Johnny, staring blankly at him.

"Sucking lemons makes the players' mouths water. You wouldn't want a spit in the face, would you? Why don't you go suck your lemons outside?"

The two teenagers stared blankly at Johnny, exchanged shrugs with each other and went on lipping their citruses.

Johnny grabbed one by the arm. "Outside, punk!"

The big-shouldered one exploded into oaths. "Who the hell you think you're shoving around, crud?"

"You, punk!" Johnny reached up with his open hand and slapped the lemon from the big youth's mouth. The lemon spun to the floor and plopped there. The dancers, waiting between numbers for the music to start again, gathered around, their eyes bright, their faces flushed with excitement.

Fight.

Johnny and the big-shouldered youth faced each other, each waiting for the other to move. Turned sideways to the second youth, the pimply barrel-shaped one, Johnny was not ready when that worthy took the lemon half out of his mouth, aimed it at Johnny and squeezed hard.

Juice spurted on Johnny's face, biting into his eye.

He spun and raised his open palm to hit at the pimply youth's face. Somebody gave a little scream in the group of dancers and it sounded more like a squeal of delight.

That brought Johnny back to sense. What was he trying to do? Play sitting duck to a couple of trouble hunters?

Johnny inhibited his swing, grabbed the wide-shouldered teener by the arm and propelled him over toward the door.

"Outside, tough guy!" he snapped.

The wide-shouldered youth grinned and turned to the barrel-shaped one. The barrel-shaped one followed, giving the first a wink.

The three moved out the door and on through the portico to the patio.

Once in the quiet and deserted patio, Johnny let go of the wide-shouldered youth's arm. He grinned briefly.

"It's a very funny gag, boys, and we'll all get together sometime over some suds and have a real tall stack of yocks. But for now, let's leave it lay! Hit the road, huh?"

The wide-shouldered punk turned around and shoved his chest into Johnny's face.

"Make us, Big Daddy! Make us stop sucking lemons!"

Johnny stared from one to the other. "Make you? And get a lawsuit plastered all over me? Not on your life. I don't raise a finger to a customer of Joel Salinas'."

The pimply barrel-chested kid laughed. "This butter-cup ain't gonna give us no action, Sid."

"Come on, Rabbit," Sid said to Johnny. "Let's mix!"

Johnny felt the anger swim up to the surface in him. With great difficulty he restrained himself from hurling a punch. He snarled through his teeth: "Beat it, jerks!"

The pimply youth looked at Sid. "After you, Sid."

Sid bowed. "After you, Dominic!"

Dominic smashed a fist into Johnny's ribs. A love tap. But it was taunting, very devilishly taunting. Johnny turned to dodge the second blow but it never came.

Sid leaned over and yanked on Johnny's tie.

The two hotshots laughed.

Johnny reached out and grabbed them both by the necks and banged their skulls together. There was a very satisfactory popping noise in the patio.

Sid and Dominic yelped in pain.

At that, two huge shapes loomed out of the night from the shadows of the patio where they had been waiting and converged on Johnny Blue. Then Johnny knew exactly what had happened: he had been maneuvered expertly into a brutal little whipsaw.

One of the bruisers felled Johnny with a blow to the side of the head, and the second started working over Johnny's torso with his hobnailed boots. Johnny writhed and rolled about on the flagstone floor of the patio and avoided a maiming, but by the time he had gotten to his knees the two bruisers were on him again.

"All right!" shouted a hard, grinding and familiar voice. "Break it up! Break it up!"

The bruisers vanished, making for the shadows past the patio wall.

Johnny sat up, shook his head and wiped the sweat from his skin. Art Feist, Salinas' head bouncer, had ambled leisurely across the patio toward him.

Johnny saw Sid and Dominic standing innocently behind him.

Feist grinned. "Trouble, Blue?"

"No trouble," Johnny grated out. "Just extending El Camino Real hospitality to some of our guests."

Feist eyed the two teenagers briefly. "Hi, Sid, Dominic."

The youths acknowledged the greeting with silent nods.

A group of curious onlookers had crowded into the patio and now stood in a circle. And then, almost on cue, the mob opened up like the waves of the Red Sea for Moses. Joel Salinas barged through, his eyes flashing fire and his mustache twitching.

He confronted Johnny. "You could have handled that better, Blue. This isn't a sparring ring."

"I know. How could it be, when it's more like a Caribbean hill-bandit stronghold?"

"You have to get used to these kids. They love a good old brannigan once in a while. Learn to live with it."

"The hell. I'm going to swear out a warrant for their arrest on a charge of attempted assault and battery." Johnny stared at the two youths belligerently. They gazed blankly at him. Now that their part in the deadfall was over, they had no intention of jumping into any beans again.

Salinas laughed shortly. "I wouldn't."

"You wouldn't. I would."

Salinas rubbed his mustache thoughtfully.

"I'll live longer."

He left abruptly.

5.

After the dance was over, Fats Spivak and Andy Orr were drinking a few in the bar. Johnny dropped by for his usual night-cap.

"I don't like the looks of them," Fats was saying.

"Who?" Johnny asked idly.

"The two gees who drove Skinhead Bates into town." Johnny frowned. "Into town?"

Andy said, "Skinhead was beat. He needed a pop. A guy came up and told him he could get him some junk."

Fats nodded. "So our boy hops in their iron and heads for town."

Johnny was out of the drift. "So why the long faces?" he inquired.

"The two guys," Andy said.

Fats nodded. "One of them was talking a little earlier to those geeks with the lemons."

Andy nodded. "They're all in the thing together."

Johnny stared at his drink. "It ain't neat."

They were right.

By ten o'clock next morning Skinhead Bates had not appeared at El Camino Real. Johnny wondered what highway shoulder Skinhead would be found on. He felt sick and blue and for the first time he wanted to leave El Camino Real with his tail between his legs.

Somebody was playing varsity stuff and Johnny Blue was the football.

But he was not afraid to admit to himself he was scared.

He hoped he would not be scared—stiff.

7

SHERIFF DUSTIN STORM picked up a cigarillo and stared out the window of his office into the broiling main street of Cholla City. A man in a cocoa straw hat and a linen suit waved at him through the glass. Storm grunted. He swiveled the chair around from his old-fashioned rolltop desk and faced Johnny Blue. He put one hand over the papers on the desk.

"I just finished reading your little deposition here," he said pointedly.

"I'm a musician, not a novelist. Don't expect John O'Hara."

"Well, the style's fine. I like the style. You come right

out punching and that's good. It takes muscles to tell stories these days. It's the content I don't like."

"Oh?" Johnny shoved himself down in his hard chair. "How so?"

"Well, get this picture." Storm stood and looked out the window. "Two square Willies from Cholla City decide to have themselves a time out at El Camino Real. They go to the grocery store and buy one lemon. One lemon! At El Camino Real they split the lemon and they suck it in front of the bandstand. Now really, amigo, that's a crime?"

Johnny looked glum. "I know how it sounds."

"That's not all. They get thrown out of the dance hall and taken to the patio where they are told to leave with no assurance their money will be refunded."

"For God's sake, sheriff—"

"Then one of them makes a playful pass at Johnny Blue, belligerent boy bandleader. And another dusts off his cheek with a love tap. This is assault and battery?"

"Forget it, sheriff. That isn't what I really came in town to find out."

"There's more. Let me finish. Now one of our fun-loving citizens takes Mr. Blue's expensive silk tie in hand and gives it a comical jerk. Whereupon our hair-trigger musical director ups and smacks these two clowns' heads together, like a pair of ripe punkins."

There was a silence. Storm looked at Johnny. Johnny looked sad.

"Now I'd say off-hand the last act there is pretty close to a case of some kind. What could have happened? Plenty: double concussion, two cases for the gut-wagon. Johnny, be reasonable," Storm pleaded in a mocking, irritating tone.

Johnny burned.

"At which point," Storm went on, fingering the paper on the desk, "two ugly hoodlums leap out of the juniper bushes and flail the daylights out of Mr. Music." Sheriff Storm leaned toward Johnny, tapping him on the knee. "Why shouldn't they? By god, I'd do the same thing myself, if I thought two of my pals were getting roughed up by a stranger."

"If you're finished, let me tell you what I really came to town for."

"No. We're going to discuss this. Assault and battery. My ruddy brown bum. Johnny, let me talk to you like a father. Boy, I'm elected by the citizens of this community, and that means mostly by Cholla City people. We're squares, sure. But we stick together. I can't file an assault charge against four of our boys for trying to pound you into the pavement." The cigarillo smouldered and sputtered. Johnny sat stone-faced and real brought down.

"Oh, hell, kid," said Storm finally. "I know those ham-fats tried to rough you up. We all know it. But I can't do a thing to them, not in a case like this." He paused and searched Johnny's face. "Salinas tell you to lodge the complaint?"

"No," said Johnny with a grin. "He told me to have my head examined."

Storm nodded. "Mighty good advice." The sheriff leaned back, somehow dissatisfied. "That doesn't mean the law's for citizens and not for strangers, Johnny. Hell, I know how you feel. But. . . ." Storm stared at his cigarillo.

Suddenly Johnny got the distinct impression some massive and unseen evil hovered over Sheriff Dustin Storm. Maybe it derived from Gus Deane, the moneybags and dog-good voice of Cholla City. Whatever its source, it was vicious, a force Johnny could sense and understand without seeing. And for the first time he perceived Storm himself was a butterfly on a pin, hung up in a case for exhibition. John Law, for viewing only.

And Sheriff Storm knew Johnny understood. He glanced up, his glistening black eyes bared and bleak for one moment.

"Let's put it in the box and lock it up," Johnny said suddenly. Lordy, how he wanted to get away from this Cholla City, this El Camino Real, this sump hole of iniquity and violence.

Storm's voice softened. "What was it you wanted to talk to me about, amigo?" Storm had his back country twang in gear again.

Johnny wanted to pace back and forth. He stood and walked to the window. He stared out. "It looks like a nice, clean town, sheriff."

Storm snorted. "If that's what you came in to talk about, dust off, amigo. On the double." Storm swiveled back in his chair. "I've got work to do."

"I said, it looks like a clean town."

"So? Meaning it ain't?"

"Just asking," said Johnny. "But what's a man do if he came to a nice clean town like this and he had a yen?"

Storm frowned. "You? You don't look the type."

"Not me. A hypothetical gent. A traveling man. And he came to a town like this and he needed a pop. Where would he go?"

"Purely speculating. Johnny, I suppose he'd try to scrounge himself a bingle."

"A peddler? Well, just specifically and exactly where?"

Storm leaned back, a smile hiding behind his filthy cigarillo. "You're square, Johnny. You, whom I thought an old pro. Think it out. Where would you go if you needed the stuff?"

"Well, maybe to a saloon."

Storm shook his head. "Too obvious. We keep them spotted day and night. We can close them down for violation of their liquor permits. That keeps the alewives in line."

"Well, maybe a poolhall."

Storm tipped his cigarillo. "Why do you need me to do your thinking, Johnny?" He shuffled through his papers.

"Know any place in town a floater can catch himself a nice quiet game of billiards?"

Storm shrugged. "Maybe Carnahan's Bowling Alley at Main and Third."

"So long, sheriff. Oh, it's not me, if you're figuring on something nasty. It's Skinhead Bates."

"The drummer?"

"He disappeared last night. Didn't ever come back. Went off with two pals of my lemon-noodlers." Johnny pointed to the paper with the assault charges. "I hope he's alive and kicking when I raise him." Without another word, Johnny stalked out.

Sheriff Storm sat watching him go down the sun-baked street. When he was alone, the mask of emotionless disinterest dropped from his eyes and a naked expression of self-loathing took its place.

Carnahan's Bowling Alley squatted low on the sidewalk, keeping its ear close to the ground. The windows were pleasantly dirty, enough so as not to scare away the clientele. Inside there were rows of pool tables in a large, low-ceilinged room, and beyond that, in the back room, Johnny could hear the occasional roll of a bowling ball and the banging of the pins going down.

A man in a Hawaiian sports shirt sat behind the cash register smoking a cigarette and reading the racing form. He got up and lighted one of the swinging lamps over the billiard table, and Johnny amused himself for fifteen minutes shooting. No one had come in at all, and even the bowling ball in the room was quiet.

Johnny went over to the man in the sports shirt and said, "Nice town."

The man looked him over and appeared not to recognize him as the bandleader at El Camino Real. He nodded.

"A little quiet, for my dough."

The man squinted again and went back to the Tanforan results. "I like it that way."

"I just blew in," Johnny said easily. "Can't locate any of my pals."

"Oh," said the man. "Who do you know?"

"Nobody local," said Johnny. "Just boys passing through. Ever heard of Pinky Haskell?" The man stared and shook his head. "Or Mike Gardena?" Johnny rubbed his nose casually. "They blow through here occasionally."

"That's nice," said the man coldly.

Johnny grinned. "Not too friendly a town."

"We pick our own, and keep them close."

"I like that," Johnny said. "That shows you're hip."

The man looked up suddenly, alert. "A band guy, huh? A musician?"

Johnny's face fell. "How'd you know, man?"

"Never mind."

"Well, the gas is leaked. I'm a windjammer. And I'm on the schmeck."

"Chrissakes, why does every damned kokomo in the country come to Asa Carnahan for directions. Hell, man, go down that street there, turn right, go down three doors

until you come to a walkup painted green. Go up two flights, go down the hall, fourth door on your right. Tell them Carnahan hates war." The man went down into the racing form again.

Johnny smiled docilely. "Thanks, loads," he said.

The man looked up at him warily. Johnny was walking out. The man shrugged.

The back street smelled of garlic and hot peppers and stale enchillada makings. Heavy-breasted girls worked on the family wash, leaning out windows or stretching up from the ground to the clothes line. They dressed in bright colored jersey blouses that showed off their hefty façades to fine advantage. A man could stand there all day and be in love with the world.

A fat man in an undershirt and a jock strap sat behind one of the ground floor windows, drinking a bottle of beer and watching a TV soap opera. Johnny made the hallway and got to the right door. He tapped.

"Uh?" a surly voice grunted.

"Carnahan hates Roosevelt."

"Huh?"

"I said, Carnahan hates war. I need some stuff. H."

The surly voice said sleepily, "How many decks?"

"Slap a deuce on me," said Johnny. A rat-faced man opened the door and handed the white envelopes to Johnny. Johnny handed in the money.

"Say," said Johnny. "Friend of mine came in here last night. Thought you might know where he went."

"What make, Jack? C man? H man? Muggles?"

"Skinhead Bates, his name is. Must be on Horse. Seen him?"

The rat-faced man scratched his stomach. "Oh, yeah. That band man. He's at Happy Annie's." The rat-faced man grinned. "What's left of him." He moved the door closed, but Johnny's number tens were in the way.

"Where does she hang out?"

"Annie? You kidding? Next door."

3.

Happy Annie was a blond, motherly, three-hundred pounds of splendid good humor, shading sixty, on the

sunny side. She had two gold teeth in front, and she was so proud of being that well-heeled that she continually displayed her wealth for all the world to envy.

She had Skinhead, all right, she told Johnny, with maternal concern. Skinhead was in bed, flat on his back at ten thousand feet, lying there like a worm in a cocoon, bandaged and splinted in sheets and blankets and some old corset stays that had been handy when they found him.

Johnny took one look and backed out of the room. Skinhead was asleep. Very far asleep. He would not have anything to say for a long, long time.

"What happened to him?" Johnny asked Happy Annie.

"Well, it was just terrible," said Happy Annie, smiling and hugging her massive elbows in her vast meathooks. "I don't know, you get used to all the shooting and screaming and yodeling around a neighborhood like this, what with all the creeps, deadbeats, and bums that hang out here—it ain't like the old days—but last night it was just too much.

"Now understand me, this did use to be a fine old neighborhood, big stockmen living right down the street, could buy and sell half the men in San Diego, but with all that new money coming into town from gas stations, road gangs, and things like that, well, it has just kind of run down.

"I tell you, once I had the best damned clientele in the state, I did! Big swells from Tia Juana, the race tracks at Agua Caliente, San Diego, real estate millionaires, Hollywood moguls and all the rest!"

"What happened to Skinhead?"

"Oh, well, about three a.m. everybody's peaceable as church, all the cribs being quiet, and me laying there reading one of them historical romances and munching a few boxes of chocolates, and then what do you suppose happens but this big ruckus outside starts up in the backyard. Mind you, the backyard of Happy Annie! The nerve. Sounded like a hundred odd grizzly bears fighting over a chamber pot of honey. Lordy, Lordy!

"Well, anyway, it seems that nobody in the whole darned neighborhood had the gumption to go out and wind it up. Except me. So I did. I don't know who they were,

or why they put the bee on this young man, but a couple of hoodlums had him out there, stamping on him and ripping him to pieces and like to killing him. Guess that's what they was set on doing. They was trying hard enough.

"So I ups and took him in after shooin' off the other two with my own bare hands, plus an old coal shovel and a poker I keep handy in case somebody tries to make off with my receipts, and they run off when they seen me, you can betchal! Darned if I could see who they were, but I'm one to bet they've been to my place before, one time or another, and they was afeared I'd recognize 'em."

Happy Annie shrugged. "Well, no matter. You can't pick and choose your clientele any more. Your junkie friend there just about caved in. But I think he'll pull through all right."

Johnny gazed into the room again. "What's wrong with him?"

"Well, they worked over his head and chest considerable. And they stepped on his hands—I'll never figure out why. Tromped 'em to a pulp. Broke every finger in each hand, doc said."

Johnny knew why, all right. But he couldn't say so to this jovial good samaritan. It was step number three in a reign of terror. What were they after? Why did they want the band out of El Camino Real? Who were they really after? Obviously Brad and Skinhead were only two in a long line of victims. Who was next?

"Can you keep him here?" Johnny said.

"Well, I sure ain't gonna throw him out in that condition! Hell, they'd think my girls done it, tossing him into the ceiling or something. None of them that good, I can tell you that! Not these days, anyhow. I mind one I had once—"

Johnny said, "He's my drummer."

"Oh," said Happy Annie. "You the leader man out at Salinas' dump?"

"Yeah."

"Well, rest in peace, mister. I'd pick out a nice shady spot in some graveyard if I was you. They play it rough in that league."

Johnny looked in at the bed where Skinhead lay. "Looks like it."

"I might have known whose work that was," mused Happy Annie.

Johnny grasped one huge balloon-like arm. "You know who's responsible for this?"

A shadow came across Happy Annie's pig-like face. Terror. She hauled away her beefy meathook and stared at Johnny. "I don't know nothing." Johnny saw that even red-hot branding irons across her fat biscuit wouldn't loosen her tongue. Not when she was that scared.

"I'll pay the doctor bills," he said finally. "Thanks."

Happy Annie beamed. Her gold teeth shone. She crowed. "It ain't nothing, really!" She walked with Johnny to the street. "Now, you just leave him entirely in my hands, mister. He'll be a new man in no time." She clucked about like a mother hen with a brood of chicks.

"So long, Annie," Johnny said.

8

JOEL SALINAS left word with the desk clerk for Johnny to see him immediately. Johnny went in and took a leisurely shower, ate and then strolled up to Salinas' big office. Salinas hollered at him to come in.

"Sit down, Johnny," said Salinas. He fussed with some papers and finally said, "Well, the band's shaping up, except for all that blues crap. A little more of the smooth stuff, Johnny. There's a reason Lombardo's been up there all these years."

Johnny frowned. "Thanks. What is this, a raise?"

Salinas smiled an oily creep smile. "No. Something more serious. Johnny, at your age do you have to be told the facts of life all over again?"

Johnny said, "You mean about men and dames and that they don't get in a family way by just kissing?"

"No. Chapter Two. About the two kinds of places: where the light shines big and the other places where it's dark. The shady side of the street."

Johnny looked interested. "Tell me more."

"You've been poking in some of the darker places,

Johnny. It's best if you don't. You'll get your fingers burned."

Johnny's throat tightened. "One of my men already got his burned. Did they tell you about that?" Johnny's voice choked.

Salinas nodded, his eyes hooded. "Yes. Naturally I feel great concern for Mr. Bates and his crushed fingers. But, Johnny, unless you pay attention to the standing orders that state you are to stay out of town, the same might happen again, only worse."

"Why? Who's behind this? If you know, tell me. They damn near killed Brad. I want one try at them. Just one."

Salinas' eyes prowled the room and finally settled on an innocuous ash tray.

"Cool down, Johnny. I think you know as much as I know. Down in Cholla City they hate our guts. They will do anything to ruin us."

"Why? I don't understand. Doesn't your place bring business to them? What's their profit in ruining you?"

Salinas shrugged. "The real estate interests, I am sure. They want to make Cholla City a huge modern city, another suburb of Los Angeles like everything else in California, so the real estate vultures can make a million. But while El Camino Real is here, they feel their chances aren't good."

Johnny sat in thought. "Let them buy you out. You could make a fortune that way."

Salinas' voice was soft as silk stockings. "When the price is right, I'll see. I'm just biding my time."

"So meanwhile, you want me to lay off. If I upset the status quo they might burn your place to the ground and then you'd lose a fortune."

"It's amply insured," Salinas said coldly. "If you're planning a little arson yourself. But, generally speaking, that's the story. Take it or leave it."

"I've a choice?" Johnny asked.

"Oh, certainly. If you abide by the rules, then you'll make big money here playing for me. If you don't, I'll make you breach your contract and throw you out to the wolves without a cent."

Johnny laughed. "How do I keep my nose clean when I'm still looking for the man who got to Brad Samson?"

Salinas' eyes narrowed. His Hitler mustache was a straight line across his pursed lip. "That, my boy, is your problem."

Johnny rose to go and, as he pulled open the door, Salinas said, "Keep your nose out of the dark corners, Johnny, or tell me what kind of flowers you want on your casket. It's one or the other."

Johnny laughed. "Make mine stink weed." He closed the door.

Salinas sat running his fingers over his lower lip. His eyes were dark, and behind that careful, set expression, he was scared.

2.

As Johnny walked across the foyer to the phone booth he saw Holly Salinas climbing up the front steps with three beautiful young girls in their early twenties. They were dark-skinned and one of them had blonde hair. They were all built with an eye for comfort and speed, and they wore bright-colored print dresses.

Holly walked with them into the foyer and turned at the stairs to take them up. Johnny could see beyond them out the front door where a dusty car was parked. It looked as if it had had a long hard trip.

"Hello, Johnny," said Holly coolly. "These are Mr. Salinas' nieces from Mexico City."

Johnny looked at Holly. "I didn't think I'd seen you around for a day or two," he said. "Have you been there?"

Holly flushed. "Did you miss me?"

Johnny laughed. "Of course." He stared at the girls, and the blonde one, who had been looking at him out of her golden eyes, dropped her glance.

"I'm sorry, Johnny. We do have to get some rest. It was an exhausting journey," Holly said.

Johnny nodded. "I'm sure it was."

Holly turned and took the three girls with her. They were chattering like magpies after their long silence in front of Johnny. Then Johnny understood. They did not speak English. He laughed to himself and crossed to the phone booth.

The Willie at the San Diego local decided to play it for laughs.

"A drummer! My god, Blue, what do you do with musicians up there? Eat them for breakfast?"

"Care to come up and try your luck?"

"Me? Hell, all I play is third kazoo."

Funny boy, thought Johnny.

The Willie said he was sending up a drummer on the next bus. He asked what kind of replacement Johnny figured he would need next: a new band leader? Johnny hung up, wondering why everybody had to try to make such a big joke out of it. He wished the wise Willie in Diego had seen Skinhead all bundled up in sheets and blankets and corset stays, with his hands amashed to smithereens. There was nothing comic about that.

Johnny pushed out of the booth angrily and went outside.

3.

Later it occurred to Johnny he should tell Salinas he was hiring a new drummer in case the man showed up and reported in. He moseyed into the foyer and tried the door to the office. It was open. There was no answer to his third knock.

Johnny stepped inside. Salinas was gone. Johnny remembered the three nieces. Probably Salinas had gone up to see them.

Johnny came out and climbed the stairs slowly. The whole suite on the right belonged to the Salinas family. First door, Mrs. Salinas' room. Second door, guests. Third door, Joel Salinas. Figuring he could wait in Salinas' room if the boniface were occupied with the three Mexican girls, Johnny went to the third door and rapped.

Someone called, "Come in."

He entered.

The room had wine-colored drapes and thick rugs. The pottery was Mexican and in the very best of taste. A beautiful Navaho blanket hung from the wall. There were several shawls draped over false balconies on two sides of the room. One lamp was turned on. It cast a yellow light over a small area of rug.

The windows were open and the big pepper tree out front loomed up, its tiny leaves shimmering. A fine breeze was moving a tinkling glass mobile. It was a perfect room for an assignation. Johnny thought how like Salinas to have a room like this, made for one thing only.

He turned slightly and saw who was sitting on the couch. She had two drinks in front of her, one for herself, and the other obviously for Salinas.

Roxie Hall smiled at Johnny, amused.

"Come in, Johnny, and close the door." She laughed. "And your mouth."

Johnny came in, staring in disbelief. "Excuse me for being startled," he began stiffly.

"Oh, my," Roxie smiled. "Is Johnny going to be jealous?"

"I've got no claim on you," he snapped. "What you do is your own business."

"Precisely. But you are shocked."

Johnny laughed flatly. "I didn't think you were that kind of a girl."

"What kind of a girl?"

"The kind that would come to Salinas' room. Where is he, by the way?"

"He's out for a moment. Don't worry. He's not the jealous type."

"Why did you come?"

"He invited me, if it's any business of yours. When a girl is invited, she comes. If she's interested."

"So you admit you're interested."

"In oodles and oodles of boodle, Johnny? I like the long green reasonably well as I told you once before."

"But, Roxie, good Lord! Salinas!"

Roxie bridled. "So? He's made his pile, hasn't he? He must have something on the ball, mustn't he?" She stared at him, her eyes as hard as that beer bottle glass again.

"Money, Roxie. Is that all you think of?"

Roxie laughed harshly. "Listen to who's lecturing."

Johnny turned to go. "Tell Salinas I'm hiring a new drummer. Skinhead's been beat up."

Roxie took a breath. Her eyes were pools of fear. "Beat up?"

"Like whipped cream. Both his hands are broken. He won't be giving us the beat for a long time now."

"Oh, God," said Roxie. Her voice sounded far off. "I'll tell Joel."

Johnny slammed the door behind him. He cursed Roxie because she had gone to Salinas' room. But, after all, what did he think she was, *simon-pure*? An angel with detergent wings?

Johnny was so annoyed he went in and threw down a shot of rye, a thing he rarely did in the afternoon.

4.

The new drummer was fair with the sticks and the band was getting better. The blues jag was beginning to draw them closer together when they were playing. Fats was pinching his lip just enough to add that essential quarter tone to the blue notes, and he was in fine shape.

Johnny was beginning to ride back into the blues groove he had deserted years before. His chord inversions were coming back to him and he gave a good solid footing for the rest of the band to tramp on. The sloppy chording of the pop numbers had weakened his stretch some, and now he could feel the muscle tension in his fingers. But the left tenths and the right hand's inverted sixths were beginning to return.

It was a real ball for awhile there. The fans were lapping it up like honey from a comb. Eventually they played some pop tunes, and it was astonishing how wishy-washy and flat they sounded after *The Tin Roof Blues*, *Viper Drag*, and *The Twelfth Street Rag*. Johnny thought about Brad Samson, who would never blow again, and Skinhead Bates, who was through for the time being, and he knew they would both be happy to hear the boys in such fine fettle.

Exhausted but somehow physically purged of all aches and pains, Johnny went down to his mission, San Luis Obispo de Tolosa, directly after the band broke up. He wanted to look up Roxie later, but he thought that, before he did so, he would fix up the place just in case he could talk that fly chick into strolling down there with him for a duet in the lamplight.

He hurried into the house and snapped on the light. He was almost in the kitchen when he pulled up short with a screech of brakes and a shower of dust.

"Hi." There was no mistaking that voice. Or that laugh. He turned slowly.

"Oh, no!" Johnny said in dismay.

"Oh, yes!"

It was Monica Stone. She was sitting primly in his bed, propped up by the pillow. But, while she still wore all her clothes, she had pulled back the cover carefully and invitingly.

"They ought to put you in a cage," Johnny sighed.

"Now, Johnny. Don't be mean. Are you implying I'm a cat?"

"Nope. A rabbit."

She giggled. "I took you up on your invitation."

"Invitation? I thought you were the one that extended the welcome mattress. Oops, I mean mat."

"Well, now, maybe it was. That's only a slight error. Anybody could make a simple mistake like that."

Johnny shook his head. "Odd that nobody does but you. Well, you've got to get out."

"Out? But I just got in."

"I've got a date," he lied. He had been thinking about that date with Roxie, anyway.

"Two-timing me! Honestly."

Johnny sighed helplessly. "You've got to go."

"Not until you make a dishonest woman of me."

"Impossible."

"Johnny Blue, I'm not stirring out of this room until—"

Johnny let the pause lie there, writhing on the floor.

"Until—" he said, with interest.

Monica tried not to, but she blushed. She immediately pretended she had not. "Until you kiss me goodnight," she said, lamely.

Johnny hitched up his pants, rolled up his sleeves, smoothed down his shirt front and moved toward her slowly. Her eyes got round and interested.

"Oh," she said. "Marlon Brando."

"No. Johnny Blue," he said, picking her up off the bed.

She snuggled. "Oh, you masterful man!" She ran her fingers over his face. "You great big hunk of muscle."

He carried her to the doorway and heaved her through it into the darkness outside. "Beat it!"

She gasped and cursed and beat her fists on the closed door. Then she whimpered from the darkness, a beaten dog. "Johnny," she cried. "Johnny." She cursed. She beat on the door. "Dirty slob!" She sniffled.

He pulled a book out of his bookcase with great casualness and read for several minutes. He heard a skulking noise outside. Then he heard footsteps. They were moving away. He leaned back and read for an hour and a half. Then he yawned, had a cigarette, took a shower, turned out the lights and climbed into bed.

Four and one half seconds later she was inside the room and in bed with him. He never did find out how she got through that door. She giggled.

"Stone-Face," he muttered weakly.

"Aren't I the persistent little cuss, though?"

"illy God, if I told the boys this, they'd never believe it."

"Don't, then."

"I won't."

"Well, move over, can't you? Bed-bog."

"What's your angle, Monica? How much do they pay you to do this to me?"

"It's so much fun I do it free. Does that tickle?"

"Cut that out! I'm serious. Who's so damned interested in me they'd want me tailed night and day?"

"Everybody likes you, Johnny. You're real gone. How about that?"

"Get over on your side!"

"Oh, you masterful fellow! I like a masterful fellow. Johnny, be masterful."

"What's the gimmick? You take tape recordings of this and play it back to Gus Deane at breakfast? Is it really Deane you work for? And what about that sheriff? Is he in on it?"

"I don't see how you stand all that hair on your chest. Ever think of shaving it off?"

"Now about this assignment you're on—who's the information for? And what's it got to do with Brad Samson's trouble?"

But, after a moment, instead of answering, she let out

a little sigh of concern. Then, at last, she had a word: "Johnny," she said.

"What?"

"I've got something to tell you."

"Uh?"

"I hope it won't be too big a shock to you."

"Uh?"

"I'm not a virgin."

Their lips, and other things, met.

But as for the goings-on at El Camino Real, her informational virginity remained intact.

9

JOHNNY FOUND a surprise waiting for him at the desk marked *correo* in the main lobby of the *posada*.

"Una carta por usted, Señor Blue," said the Hollywood desk clerk in very bad Spanish, shifting nervously about in his sombrero and huaraches.

"Thanks, Dads," Johnny nodded, grinning and reaching out for the letter.

He studied the handwriting. No one he knew. He looked at the post mark. Colmena, California. He frowned. He could not place it by ear but he did know it was located on the seacoast down past Diego.

He ripped it open.

"Johnny," the note said simply. "The money you have given me is gone. I do not know what to do." And it was signed simply, "Marky."

He frowned. He would have to go to Colmena. He looked at the name of the town and smiled. Colmena. Beehive. They named them with a pocket dictionary in California. He shook his head and started moseying toward the front door.

"Hasta luego," said the make-believe Spaniard behind the counter of the *correo*.

"I'll bet they miss you at Central Casting, amigo," Johnny waved back.

The big blonde nurse with the dimples smiled at him as he cantered up to the main desk at The County General Hospital.

"Good morning, Mr. Blue."

"Any news about Brad Samson?" Johnny asked.

She kept her smile but her eyes showed the answer before her lips formed the words. "Nothing, sir."

"So he's still out for the count," Johnny murmured, tapping the envelope from Marky on his thumbnail.

The big blonde nurse nodded, her eyes warm and compassionate. "That's the story."

Johnny shook his head grimly. "The story of my life."

"Do you want to go in and see him?"

Johnny started to shake his head, and then thought better of it. "Yes, I think I will try a chorus of that today, if you don't mind."

"Third floor, room 3F."

Johnny nodded absently. "Thanks, beautiful."

The girl flushed prettily but Johnny had already started down the corridor to the elevator. He found 3F without any trouble and walked in the open door.

A stern-faced nurse with steel-rimmed glasses glanced up from a book she was reading and frowned at him. She shook her head and pointed to the door behind Johnny.

He gestured to her to join him out in the hallway and she grumpily put down her book and did so.

"He's still the same?" Johnny asked.

"Of course he's still the same. What do you expect him to be? Back to normal? This man has been lingering on the verge of death for hours. Can't you leave him alone?"

"Save the editorials, Miss Plasma-Drip, and give me the headlines. He's still unconscious?"

"Yes, of course!" the nurse nodded vehemently, her brows knitting in a frown. "We'll let you know as soon as he's able to talk to anyone."

Johnny leaned into the room, seeing the drawn curtains around the bed and the surgical bandages and antiseptic on the polished tray next to the pillow.

"May I step in and take a look?" he said, turning to the narrow-eyed nurse with the thin bloodless lips. "I won't bother him."

"Humph!" muttered the nurse and then she relented. "All right. I suppose you have good reason to."

Johnny nodded silently and approached the screened-in-bed. He peered in through the opening at the bandaged head still lying motionless on the pillow. He could not see much of Brad's face, nor much of his body. A shudder coursed down Johnny's spine. Even when he came to, Brad would not want to see his own broken face nor his own shattered body for a long time.

He would not want to live, as a matter of fact, when he would find out his teeth were gone and that he would never blow another horn as long as he would live.

He would want to kill himself, Johnny thought.

Maybe it would be best if Brad would never wake up from this sleep that had enchained him so long already. The nightmare that would follow the welcome oblivion of sleep would be so much worse.

Johnny shivered. He nodded his thanks to the stern-lipped nurse, and moved quickly out of the room, his stomach queasy, his eyes suspiciously burning.

God, if only he could nail the bastard who had done that to Brad! Who was it? Where was he now? Why had he maimed Brad for life? Why had he made it impossible for Brad ever to be a whole human being again?

And that lousy little Marky! What did she have to do with Brad's trouble?

In a little while he might find out.

3.

He gunned the Jaguar down the hot dusty highway toward the Coast Route. The sun was hot in the sky. Shimmering layers of heat rose from the desert about him. Occasionally a jackrabbit hit for the mesquite, galloping across the highway in a moment of panic at approach of the Jag.

And then the desert would return to its impassive motionless silence.

He passed through Cholla City and four other little

towns on the way to the Coast. Then, at the Coast Route, he turned left, passed two more towns, and finally came to a sign that read, "Colmena, 4 miles."

It was then that he inadvertently glanced in the rear view mirror of the Jag and saw the blood-red Comet, a brand new job with brand new license plates.

Something stirred in his mind. He had seen the blood-red Comet somewhere else recently. Had it not been parked in the big four-acre lot at El Camino Real next to the *posada*?

The hairs on the back of his neck bristled. There was little question about it. Johnny Blue was being tailed. He breathed a sigh of relief. At least here was something he could put his finger on. At least here was an evil that could be pinpointed, targeted, shot at.

He glanced again in the rear view mirror, trying to see who was driving the Comet. But the sun was against him. He could not make out the driver because of the windshield glare.

Johnny gunned the Jag and approached the outskirts of Colmena like a rocket in the jet stream. He passed three gasoline stations, those Twentieth Century harbingers of California towns, and saw he had left the Comet a fair distance to the rear.

The highway curved ahead. Once around the curve Johnny pulled into a highway cutting off from the main road at right angles. A few farmhouses dotted the landscape. He gunned the Jag down the paved highway and pulled up behind a clump of manzanita.

He watched for the Comet.

It passed the intersection and continued in the direction of Colmena.

Patently Johnny Blue waited in the Jag, keeping the engine idling.

Five minutes later he grinned to himself. The Comet was approaching the intersection from the opposite direction. The driver had realized his error and was backtracking to pick up the trail of Johnny's Jag.

The Comet pulled up past the intersection. After a moment, it made a wide sweeping turn in the highway and came on the road where Johnny was waiting.

As the Comet shot past the manzanita bush, Johnny

stepped on the Jag's gas, screeched into motion, overtook the Comet and slammed in at an angle in front of it, forcing it off the edge of the roadway.

Laughing, Johnny jumped out of the Jaguar and approached the Comet, his eyes squinting against the sun, balling up his fists and ready to grab whoever stepped from the Comet.

He peered into the car and got the surprise of his life.

The driver was Roxie Hall.

4.

The vodka screwdrivers were cool and competent and Johnny and Roxie drank them slowly inside a bar called La Sombra. The Shadow. They sparred and parried and feinted and sparred again.

"Isn't it a gasser the two of us should get the same idea at the same time, Roxie? I mean, to come to the Coast here for a swim?"

The lovely calm eyes looked over the rim of the cocktail glass at him, amused and wary. "I think you said it before, Johnny. We're blowing in the same key."

"I had no idea the Comet was yours," Johnny said, staring out through the front window of the bar at the Comet parked outside.

"It isn't. It's Joel Salinas'."

Johnny nodded. "Of course. That's quite a duet you two are singing, isn't it?"

The cool eyes smiled at him. "Jealous?"

"I've got the green glasses on," Johnny nodded. "How you ever fell for a highjiver like that I'll never know."

"Joel sings my kind of song, Johnny. It's those golden notes that biff me."

Johnny eyed the table. "God sure don't like ugly, Roxie. You'll get what's coming to you. That's the way the big arrangement in the sky reads. And no jamming off the chords."

"I'm sorry if I get in your mouth, Johnny, but I have my own life to live. The wearing of the long green is important to me, and I don't care where I get fitted."

"Don't lose it, Roxie," Johnny said sardonically. "You

just pick up the tambo and you'll land him, hook, line and stinkeroo."

Roxie's eyes moved away from Johnny's. "That's enough gumbat for the time being, Johnny. Come on, lay it on the line. Why did you come to Colmena?"

Johnny grinned. "I'll tell you when you tell me."

Her eyes locked with his. Her lips trembled. She looked as if she might burst out crying. Johnny clenched his hands under the table, out of sight. He knew if she did, he would never be able to keep up the stiff upper lip.

"Let's knock a fade, Johnny. I don't think I like it much in this fillmill anymore."

Johnny shook his head. "In a mo, Roxie. I've got to see a cat about a dog."

Roxie laughed.

Johnny stood up and approached the men's room at the rear of La Sombra. He entered the curtained-off portion of the saloon that housed the two restrooms. At the far end of the back there was an outside door someone had latched from the inside. It was obviously a delivery entrance.

Johnny lifted the latch and moved quickly out into the alleyway behind La Sombra. He glanced up and down and strode along the alley.

At the first street he turned back toward the main drag. He had seen the hotel's name painted on a three story building: *La Posada Roja*. The Red Hotel.

5.

Her room was on the second floor. He had no trouble finding it. The hotel was not the oldest in town, nor was it the newest. It had frayed velvet carpeting along its corridors and varnished oak doors with transoms over the top.

Johnny raised the knocker on Room 27. He slammed it twice and waited for an answer.

There was none.

He pounded again, this time hearing the vibrations of the knocker echoing in the hallway. Someone would certainly hear the commotion and wonder what was going on.

No answer.

Angrily Johnny lifted the knocker and banged again. The stupid clerk downstairs had said she was in her room. If he said so, she must be. Why would he lie?

And yet. . . .

A cold chill coursed through Johnny's body. Suppose she was in the room and had been in the room for some time. Suppose she was lying there in that bed unable to get up and answer the door. Suppose she was sick, or knocked out, or dead!

Johnny grasped the knob and tried to turn it. The door was locked. He banged on the wood panelling this time, kicking with his shoe. The door shuddered but it did not give.

There was no sound from inside 27.

"Marky!" Johnny cried. "Marky! Do you hear me?"

No answer.

From down the hallway a door opened abruptly. A middle-aged woman with her hair in curl papers squinted out into the hallway. She saw Johnny.

"Shut up, you young hoodlum! What do you think this is, a meeting hall for juvenile delinquents? You get out of here, boy, or I'll call the law!"

Johnny turned and stared at the woman a moment. Her eyes were bloodshot. She was weaving slightly. Drunken old doxie, he thought. Her bosom sagged tiredly into her night coat. Her lips hung open heavily now that she had finished speaking. She stared once again and then pulled in her head and slammed her door resoundingly.

"Shove it," muttered Johnny.

He backed off and leaped at the door to Room 27, hitting it hard with both feet. The knob twisted and the door creaked. Now, using his shoulder, Johnny ran at the door and pushed it open. It gave with a splinter of wood and a wrench of metal.

Johnny almost went to his knees on the floor inside.

He climbed to his feet, looking around frantically.

She was lying in the bed and she had no bed clothes on. She was lying there stark naked, her brown little body gleaming in the half light in the room. The shades were drawn. It was as hot as the hinges of hell. There was sweat all over her body.

Her naked breasts were thrust up, the tips red and taut. Her arms were thrown out beside her. Her mouth was open, her small teeth pecking out from her lips. She had her eyes closed.

He thought for a moment she might be breathing. He ran to her, putting his ear down to the softness of her breast. But he heard nothing. He seized her wrist then, her limp, flexible wrist, lifted it and pressed in with his forefinger. She was incredibly light, almost skin and bone. He could discern no pulse beat at all.

He stared at her, the blood draining from his face. "Marky!" he cried. "Marky! Wake up!"

He saw the bottle, then. It was a bottle of pills. He picked it up and glared at it. Seconal. He might have known. He shook the bottle. There were only six left in the bottom. The rest of the bottle must have gone into Marky's greedy little body.

"Marky!" he shouted, seizing her and lifting her out of the bed quickly.

He carried her to the bathroom and let her body slump down on the floor, propping it in the corner. Then he reached in and turned on the shower, not too hot, not too cold. Then he lifted her naked body and pushed her inside.

He was so busy he did not hear the footsteps in the next room. He did not know anyone was inside with him until he turned to see the blue nose of the revolver and the stony eyes of Sheriff Dustin Storm.

"Lend a hand!" Johnny cried, motioning Storm over to him.

"You're a cool one," the Sheriff said, but he pocketed the gun and came over to help.

"But if you make one phony move, Blue, I'll put a steel-jacketed slug in your breadbasket." The weather-beaten lips stretched in a death's-head grin. "You dig me?"

"I dig," said Johnny Blue.

And he did.

THE SUN gods had turned on the desert heat to blast furnace regulation, and the Jaguar and the Comet simmered along the gummy macadam like flies treading on a wad of chewing gum. Beetles, bugs and insects of all shapes and sizes immolated themselves on the windshields of the Jaguar, hoping for a cooler time in Purgatory than in Southern California's desert lands.

Finally Johnny Blue decided he had had it. He put the binders to the Jag and signalled to the blood-red Comet behind him to pull off and approach a tacky spa in the sands called The Hut. Roxie tooled the Comet in behind Johnny's halted Jag and they climbed out into the brilliant sunshine, the hot dust boiling up around them.

"I've had so much warmth I need coolth," Johnny said.

Roxie smiled behind a face caked with dust and nodded. "And I need cleanth," she said.

They moved for the front door of The Hut, and as they did so the highway about them became instantly alive, humming and buzzing with the sound of many screeching tires. Johnny Blue turned and gazed in stupefaction at the mass of motoreyles converging on the driveway of The Hut from the highway. There must have been twenty cycles, all throwing up clouds of stinking exhaust, all belching out flames and bursts of unburned gas, all shaking their riders.

The riders dismounted. There were all male. There were short and tall, fat and skinny, muscled and limp. They were a conglomeration of late teenagers all dressed exactly the same in toreador shaped black leather pants, black leather jackets, goggles and tight-fitting helmets shaped to the skull.

Men from Mars.

They killed the chugging engines of their bikes one by one and assembled in phalanx to storm The Hut.

Johnny and Roxie moved quickly into the roadhouse

and found a corner in a separate room cut off from the lunch counter by a wall and a door.

The black-jacketed cyclists tramped into the lunch room just as the harried waitress set the screwdrivers in front of Johnny and Roxie. When she looked around to see what all the noise was she sighed deeply. Her face went white.

"Oh, no!" she breathed.

"Rough?" Johnny asked.

"They'll tear the place to pieces," the girl said. Her lips were trembling.

Johnny Blue lifted the screwdriver to his mouth, sniffed it and drank it.

"Ambrosia," he breathed.

Roxie nodded. "That poor girl," she said, looking down into her glass.

Johnny Blue frowned. "Who?"

"Marky," Roxie said, her eyes surprised.

Women, thought Johnny. For them, non sequiturs were born. "What about Marky?"

"Lying in that bedroom wanting to do away with herself," Roxie shuddered. She took another drink.

Johnny looked out through the dirty window at the black asphalt highway slicing the desert flatlands. "Sometimes everything piles up on you. You can't shake loose."

Roxie nodded. "Oh, I know the feeling. I've had it myself. But I shook loose at the last minute." Her eyes clouded. "But someone else I know didn't."

"Who?" Johnny toyed idly with the drink, rubbing his finger over the moisture crawling down the outside.

"Never mind," Roxie lapsed into silence.

"Sheriff Storm said she'd probably pull out of it. He's having her committed to the County Hospital. She'll be under surveillance. Because her husband's not out of the woods yet either."

Roxie closed her eyes. "So many things to happen so quickly to a family. Brad and Marky."

"Something was bugging her," Johnny mused. "Something about El Camino Real. I wonder what?"

"Did Brad have any idea?"

"If he did, it's up there with him on Cloud Nine. No

chance of taking it out and looking at it until he comes back into the earth's atmosphere."

Roxie sighed. "Far out," she said.

"And why that crazy mixed-up Marky sent a card to Sheriff Storm as well as to me, I'll never know. Almost as if she wanted him to do something about it. But what?"

"Does the sheriff have any idea what it's all about?"

Johnny shrugged. "He thinks I'm in it up to my ears. He may even think I tried to push Marky over the edge. Somebody up there seems to hate me."

"Was she always fast and loose, Johnny?"

Johnny raised his eyes and met Roxie's. "Marky? I don't really know. She always struck me as a kind of nice, lost, little kid." He laughed shortly. "A real homebody." He spread his hands helplessly. "Wrong kind of body."

"Where did Brad meet her?"

"In L. A. I think," Johnny said. "Why? You think you can figure out what was bugging her? And what happened to Brad?"

Roxie glanced up, saw Johnny's fixed, intent look, and turned away nervously. "No, Johnny. It's just that I always read Marky as a kind of a nice kid, too. It was strictly off the scale for her to run out just after Brad was hit."

Johnny lifted an eyebrow. If only Roxie knew the truth, that Marky had shackled up with that square john, tried to roll him of his wad and then had ended up in the hay with Johnny!

But there was something working there underneath, all right, Johnny thought, a yeasty bit of evil. Marky had changed overnight. It was almost as if she were now a different person from the girl Brad had first married. Or had the wanton always been there, hiding out under Marky's dark skin, just waiting for a chance to spring loose?

The hell with all this brain box workout. Mr. Blue shook his head.

"Sorry I had to give you the mulberry bush routine at La Sombra, Roxie," Johnny grinned. "But I didn't know what the kid had up her sleeve."

Roxie laughed, showing her teeth. "I'm just as glad I

didn't have to be there when you found her. I'm not the type who likes to collect mudes. Especially girls."

Johnny finished his drink. He glanced over at Roxie. She was still nursing hers.

"Want to try for two?"

"No, Johnny. Just let niz nurse this along. You can slap on a deuce if you want."

Johnny shrugged. "I'll stand pat." He leaned back and lit a cigarette. From the adjoining section, at the lunch counter, there was a sudden loud guffaw and then a half dozen of the black leather-jacketed cyclists started slapping the counter with their hands and hollering loudly in exaggerated mirth.

Johnny glanced through the doorway. Someone had made a bonfire of paper napkins in a glass tumbler on the counter. Flames were blazing into the air. The round-eyed, terrified waitress was hurrying across the room with a glass of water. She had already tried to put out the flames with one application. But the cyclists piled more paper on the blaze.

As she ran across the floor the girl spilled some of the water and then slipped in the splash. She skidded forward, hitting her knees, sending the glass of water hurtling into the wall ahead of her. It shattered resoundingly. She lay there a moment, shaken, and then she rose rapidly, her face crimson.

Johnny was on his feet. But the waitress got up and hobbled slowly around in back of the counter. The flames had subsided. The black-jacketed cyclists were quiet now, staring blankly about them, beating with spoons on the counter.

The terrified girl moved over toward the coffee urn and stood there, gazing about her like a frightened rabbit.

Roxie took Johnny's arm. "Don't," she whispered. "It's no use embarrassing her. If you leave those louts alone, they'll clear out."

Johnny's eyes narrowed, but finally he nodded, and sank into his chair again. But he wondered who were behind those dark glasses and Air Force caps? Some of that gang who had terrorized the bandstand at El Camino Real the other night? The lemon suckers? Sid? Dominic?

He shrugged. Roxie had almost killed her drink.

"You said a minute ago, Roxie, that someone in your family was on the seconal."

Roxie nodded. "Yes." Her eyes glassed in a far-away look. "That's why it jolted me so much when you told me about Marky."

"Father? Mother?"

Roxie shook her head. She looked down at her cock-tail glass. "No. My sister-in-law."

She said nothing more. Johnny smoked a moment, letting the wisps of cumulo-nimbus pile up in front of him. As they thinned gradually, he saw Roxie's face taking shape behind. She had a pained, disturbed expression.

"Care to chew on it?" Johnny persisted.

"No," she said after a moment, letting her eyes shift to Johnny's face and then drop to the table. "It doesn't matter much any more."

Johnny gripped her hand in his impulsively. "Don't kid yourself. It always matters. Go ahead."

"It's only that my sister-in-law was so much like Marky," Roxie said. "She was a beautiful girl, really beautiful, Johnny, with sad brown eyes, a beautiful oval face, lovely skin, the color of burnished gold, and hair as black as night. She spoke with that funny lisping musical lilt the Mexicans use when they speak English. She was as lovely as an angel."

Roxie's eyes misted over. She could not go on.

Johnny nodded. "Forget it, Roxie. Later."

She shook her head. "No. Now, Johnny. I should have told you sooner."

Johnny frowned. "Oh?"

"Only I was afraid."

"Afraid, Roxie?" Johnny stared at the girl. He did not like the way the mushroom clouds were shaping up on the horizon. Roxie afraid too?

"In a way," she said. Roxie took a deep breath. "My sister-in-law's name was Juana. She was really in love with my brother, one of those storybook things. I know she believed in him. And yet, when the trouble came, she crawled into her bed and swallowed a bottle of those pills."

Roxie put her face in her hands a moment, hiding her eyes.

"The trouble?" Johnny persisted. "What trouble?"

Roxie wiped her eyes with a tiny handkerchief from her purse. "You may as well know, Johnny. He's in prison. My brother."

Johnny felt his scalp tighten. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Something was in the air. Something intangible, and yet something which persistently screamed silently of danger, peril, hell.

"For what, Roxie?"

"For embezzlement, Johnny." Roxie's eyes were pools of pain. She tried to smile. The attempt failed dismally. She rubbed her face irritably with her hand, trying to smooth out the lines.

Johnny stubbed out his cigarette carefully. So that was the reason Roxie had been so secretive about herself. She had taken on the job of sharing her brother's guilt. Many people did. And it never helped them one bit.

"And that's why your Juana figured it was better to cop out than to face it big."

Roxie nodded, not able to smile any more. "She never told anyone anything. One day she was smiling and cheerful and full of news she had had from Ed at her last visit to him. And then the next morning they broke down the doors of the cottage and they found her in bed stone cold."

Roxie gripped the handkerchief in her fists until the knuckles went white. Her shoulders shook.

Johnny seized her tightly, jarring her slightly. "You can't pipedream it away, Roxie, so I'm not going to advise forgetting it. But try to get hold of yourself."

Roxie closed her eyes and stiffened under his grip. Her face was very white.

"Yes, Johnny," she whispered.

"Many have done what your brother Ed did. It doesn't mean the end of the world for you."

"We were close, Johnny. Maybe too close," Roxie said shakily. "But of course you're right. I won't go birdie-bye."

For a long moment Johnny watched the girl opposite him, and then he rose, touching her shoulder.

"You're better now, Roxie. Come on, let's head back for the ranch."

She glanced up, trying to smile, and gave him a feeble little laugh. She got up.

Johnny turned to signal the waitress for the check, and froze in momentary shock.

2.

He and Roxie were not alone in the bar room. A dozen black-jacketed cyclists had entered the saloon side of The Hut, oozing in as silently as penetrating oil. They stood there in a ring of masked, black-hooded figures, officials of the inquisition, their gazes riveted on Johnny Blue.

Sweat burst out all over Johnny's body. He tried to brazen it out. He took Roxie's arm and moved with her toward the doorway where the figures stood silently observing them.

"It's the joybox kid," said one of the inquisitors, grinning widely behind the goggles and the helmet. "The Daddy-O of the eighty-eights." The goggled figure turned and looked at Roxie, letting his eyes rove up and down her figure insolently. "And the pipes."

Johnny's flesh tingled. He recognized that voice. It was the toughest of the two lemon-chewers who had almost broken up the band several nights before. The wide-shouldered lout called Sid. And, right beside him, Johnny spotted the sleazy pimply one who had seconded him in the brawl that night.

But now these two had a gang with them. A hell of a big gang, faceless and ruthless. And spoiling to finish up the rumble that had started before.

"Excuse me, boys," Johnny said softly, surprised that his voice sounded so steady and authoritative. "We've got to pay our bill."

No one moved. Johnny and Roxie stood facing the twelve menacing figures.

"That's real tough tiddy, Daddy-O," Sid said, almost with a titter. "Because I think you and me got unfinished business. And where's a better place to finish unfinished business than in a nice, cozy little bar?"

Johnny opened his mouth to speak.

"Especially slice business!" snapped Sid. And with

that the carefully concealed, deadly gravity blade in the kid's hand snicked open and glinted briefly.

Johnny stared at the weapon and then his eyes raked the kid's goggled face. "Come down off the stilts!" Johnny said. "They'd book you for assault and battery and deep-freeze you for five long ones! Dog it, doornat!"

Johnny surged ahead, elbowing his way against the phalanx of dark-jacketed figures.

It was a solid wall.

Sid stepped to one side, holding the blade out in front of him, pointing slightly up, six inches from Johnny Blue's stomach. "Egghead! Dominic!" snapped Sid. Two of the jacketed figures moved forward now, and in their hands, too, glinted the deadly flat steel of gravity blades.

And Dominic and Egghead peeled off in two directions, to surround Johnny Blue and Roxie Hall.

Johnny spun about, away from Sid, and he pulled Roxie tightly to him as he did so. He went down on the floor, rolling on his shoulder, holding the girl close. "Under the table!" he whispered to her.

She nodded, and the two of them crawled clumsily under the first of the cocktail tables near the door. Sid was cursing and yelling, the rest of the cyclists deploying about the room.

Johnny grabbed the light table, tipping it over so its top faced the three knife-wielding cyclists. Sid, Dominic and Egghead. Holding it that way, Johnny moved it about like a shield. He was lucky. He deflected a blow from a thrown knife with the top. Turning, he maneuvered Roxie and himself out through the doorway.

"Don't let 'em out!" shouted Sid. But Johnny and Roxie squeezed through the doorway and left the table top there, jammed tight and blocking the way.

Johnny turned and for a startled instant saw the terrified waitress cowering against the back wall. Three of the black-jacketed cyclists moved toward him from the counter. The first one was armed with a monkey wrench from one of the motor bike tool kits.

Johnny shoved Roxie to one side and advanced on the cyclists swiftly. In a moment the twelve cyclists in the bar room would be on him. He had to work fast.

"Powder out, Roxie!" he cried.

Roxie ran for the door.

With his right hand, Johnny grabbed hard for the cyclist's right wrist. The monkey wrench swung but it only hit Johnny's arm. Gripping the teen-ager by his right wrist, Johnny spun, backed into the youth, and bent his body so the youth slipped over his back head first. The boy hit the floor with a yelp of pain. The wrench clattered to the linoleum and skidded into a corner.

Furious and yelling, the other two youths closed in on Johnny as he ran for the door. Johnny caught one of them with a flat-handed chop to the neck behind the ear and felled him instantly. It was a beautiful rabbit punch, better than any Johnny had ever delivered in the Marines.

The second youth planted a nice flesh wound on Johnny's right cheek. Johnny turned sideways, kneed the boy in the groin and the kid went down in a jackknife, howling.

The barroom door exploded then, filling the room with screaming cyclists. They poured into the lunch counter, running for Johnny Blue. Johnny ran out the door, slamming it hard behind him, and ducked across the gravel driveway.

Roxie—oh, beautiful, talented, lovely Roxie!—was sitting in the blood-red Comet, gunning the motor. The car was moving, its right hand door wide open.

Johnny ran across the gravel just as Roxie picked up speed. Sid, breathing down Johnny's neck, executed a swift and neat shoe-string tackle on Johnny Blue. Johnny kicked hard, hitting Sid in the head with his shoe. Sid fell off.

Johnny pulled himself up, leaped for the Comet. Roxie poured on the speed, turning into the highway. The door was still open. Johnny climbed in, and managed to close it before he sank down into the seat, breathing heavily, and cursing.

Behind them they could hear the gunning of many motorcycle motors.

3.

For some reason the slashers in the black leather jackets had had it. They did not pursue the blood-red Comet. A mile down the road Johnny gave Roxie the signal to pull over to the shoulder and wait. She did so.

Nothing happened.

They drove back toward the Hut. It was quite obvious that there had been no pursuit. Johnny jumped out and walked over to his Jag. He had been expecting the worst. The Jag was virginally intact.

"It doesn't make sense," he told Roxie. "I'd think finks like those kids would have slashed it to ribbons."

Roxie shrugged. "I'm with you there. It doesn't read right."

"Which leads me to a most dismal conclusion."

"Such as?"

"Apparently they're after me, for real. Like, the utmost. That slugfest at El Camino Real could have been set up as a cover for a real bloodletting. With Johnny Blue supplying the plasma."

"Well, it's a skullbuster, no doubt about it. But we've got work to do on the stand tonight. Come on. Let's cut for Laineville. Salinax will be dragging the sewer pipes for us if we don't show up."

They climbed into their respective cars and headed for El Camino Real. There was no further trouble.

4.

They had themselves a frantic ball that night. The boys had never been better. Roxie had never warbled cleaner or truer. It was a memorable session, almost a crazy jag, minus pot and needle.

They came away from it limp and used, like smoked-down cigarette butts. Somehow the excitement from the playing had seeped into the fans.

The Hollywood squares were actually hanging around looking impressed. But nothing came of it in a business way. Most of the year's television crime shows had already signed on background performers. No options were flown. No money changed hands.

Johnny had a cigarette with Roxie on the way to their pads.

"Thought you'd be late-late-showing it with Salinas, Roxie," Johnny grinned. "Or has the fire gone out under that burner?"

Roxie smiled. "My interest in Joel Salinas is purely monetary," she said. "I've learned it pays to butter up Mr. Big at a free-lance clambake like this. No offense to you, leaderman."

Johnny grinned. "Not at all. I compliment you on the way you've hyped up Salinas. He's feeding out of your hand. Just be careful he doesn't nibble it off to your elbow."

"I've been around, Johnny. Trust me."

"That I can believe, note for note. Where did you come from, Roxie? Upstate somewhere, wasn't it?"

She looked at him long and hard along her dark eyelashes. "San Calor." She laughed. "Hottest place this side of hell. It's on the Coast, about halfway between L. A. and San Francisco."

"San Calor," he mused. "Another one of those Spanish towns, huh?"

"Sure. Some smart developer stuck terra cotta tiles on prefabs, picked out a Spanish name from a grab bag and piled up a fortune in real estate."

Johnny lifted his cigarette. "Here's to El Diablo, Roxie. That's the name of the town I'm going to build after I make my pile."

"Give me a puff of that before you throw it away," Roxie laughed.

5.

Johnny was off before dawn in the Jag next morning and all the way to San Calor by eleven A.M. It was exactly as Roxie had described it: a brand new town, prefabricated and cheap, blazing red tile roofs and waving scrawny palm trees imported from the desert. Rock gardens surrounded the two-by-four houses instead of flower gardens. Gila monsters paraded about the back yards instead of gophers. Otherwise, it was a perfectly modern little paradise on the Pacific.

On the road, Johnny Blue had had plenty of time to

think. There had been several reasons why he had decided to come to San Calor and look into the past of Roxie Hall.

First of all, Johnny had mentally thumbed the events. In some mysterious way Roxie's first appearance at El Camino Real had never been satisfactorily explained to Johnny Blue. Why would El Camino Real have interested a beautiful girl like Roxie who had a set of distinctive, commercial and salable pipes in addition to the outside architecture? There must have been some reason for her having come other than the standard excuse of having wanted to join up with Johnny Blue. What did she really want at El Camino Real?

And secondly, the death of Roxie's sister-in-law held strange and sinister overtones. It had been too much like the suicide attempt of poor Brad's wife, Markey.

And Brad's accident itself, occurring so soon after Roxie's arrival, had been a most peculiar coincidence. Had there been some tie-in between the two?

And then there had been all the peculiar attacks and attempts on the boys in the band, Brad included. Had there been something working in the background, something that could have been linked with Roxie's joining the band?

Too many things had come all at once, Johnny decided. Perhaps Roxie was at the bottom of the trouble. If so, there might be something about her brother's embezzlement, jail sentence and his wife's suicide that hung together with Roxie's eventual trip to El Camino Real.

Johnny pulled to the curb on the main street of San Calor and hopped out. He was in front of the offices of the *San Calor Sentinel*. He strode in through the front door and walked to the long waist-high counter lining the huge open room.

A girl in a ponytail and thick-rimmed glasses confronted him. "Yes, sir, could I help you?"

"Let's try," said Johnny.

She frowned and drew back. "Are you being funny?" she asked with a perplexed frown. "I never know any more."

"Not at all. I'd like to study your files for about a year ago. Or maybe you remember the event I'm looking up."

The girl studied him with narrowed eyes. "Maybe I remember and maybe I don't."

"A man named Hall was sentenced to jail for embezzlement."

"Sure," said the girl instantly. "Ed Hall. What are you interested in him for?"

Johnny thought rapidly. "I'm writing a story for a magazine," he said blithely. "You know. True crime. I just wanted to get some of the background material."

The girl frowned a moment. "I don't know," she said vaguely.

"Roxie Hall sent me," Johnny said, trying a stab in the dark. The stab drew blood.

The girl's eyes lighted up. "You know Roxie?"

"Yes," said Johnny after a brief pause. "My name's Al Peabody. You ask her if she remembers me."

The girl's eyes narrowed again. "But she's not in town now. I don't know where she is."

"She's singing," Johnny said briefly. "At a night club somewhere near Imperial Valley."

The girl's face brightened. "That's our Roxie, all right. Sure, you can see the files, Mr. Peabody. Come with me."

She lifted the counter flap and let Johnny into the busy office behind. She led him down between a row of desks and then into a small side room whose walls were covered with shelves where there were bound volumes of the *Sentinel* dating back to 1930.

She led him to a table and sat him down to last year's file. Leafing rapidly, she found the sheet in which the embezzlement was featured in a front page story.

Then, waving genially, she departed. With nothing but the steady trembling of the cement floor under his feet from the throbbing of the presses to keep him company, Johnny read, leafed and read some more.

The story boiled down to this:

Ed Hall had been a trusted employee at the Garden of Eden Real Estate Agency for five years. As accountant, he had kept the keys to the office safe. Bank examiners on a routine check of the firm's fund had discovered a five thousand dollar discrepancy.

Ed Hall had refused to answer police questions but had eventually admitted he had been trying to pay back piecemeal, a disappearance he had discovered and had not yet succeeded in doing so. When asked why he had

not reported the disappearance of the money immediately, he had had no answer at all.

Police had speculated that he had either been guilty himself of having taken the money, or guilty of shielding someone else who had stolen it. Ed Hall had been sentenced immediately to a jail term.

Shortly after he had been convicted, his wife, Juana, left alone in the Hall cottage on the outskirts of town, had taken a bottle of sleeping pills, killing herself. She had been a moody girl, the newspapers had reported, and her physician had stated that she had been deeply confused and terrified of having to live alone in the house without her husband.

And that was all.

Johnny Blue closed the file and sat there staring into space. Something was fishy somewhere, he thought. Part of the story made no sense. Had Juana Hall been involved with her husband in the embezzlement? Had she been shielding him from a worse crime than stealing? Had he been shielding her?

From what Johnny had read, it was obvious that Ed Hall would not talk. He had been questioned again and again, even after his wife's death. He had refused to speak. He had merely shaken his head and held his tongue.

Then Johnny reflected on Roxie. Was she working for her brother? Was she trying to do a job for him while he was in jail? Was she stirring up a hornet's nest and trying to flush out the hornets?

There was only one trouble with hornet-hunting. The hunters usually flushed the hornets, all right, but some got bitten to death!

6.

After the first set that night, Roxie beckoned to Johnny and met him in the flagstone patio under the big pepper trees. Her eyes were flashing fire.

"So you had to stick your pointed nose into it, did you? You just couldn't keep away! I hope you choke on it!"

Johnny frowned. "I don't savvy, Roxie? What's the beef?"

"You're the beef" she cried. "When you picked my

brains about my brother yesterday. I didn't think you would get morbid! I didn't think you would run right up to my home town and start leafing through the newspapers!" Her eyes were almost teary.

Johnny held up a hand. "Who told you?"

"A cock robin!" said Roxie, trembling.

"A cock robin with a pony-tail and glasses."

"She called me. You didn't think I'd know you, did you, Mr. Peabody! I do! I know you! You're a snoop and a peep!"

"Simmer down, kid," Johnny said tiredly. "I'll admit I rolled the Jag up to your home base today. I'll admit I went to the *Sentinel* and double-ohed the story of your brother's sentence."

"You and your big nose!" stormed Roxie.

"Don't you see, baby? I want to find out if your brother's story is anything like Brad's story."

Roxie stared at Johnny a full minute in the quiet of the patio. Then she slumped, visibly.

"Yes," she whispered. "Now I see."

"Well? Take a solo chorus and sing to me."

"All right," she said. "The full story isn't in the papers. Ed didn't take the money. He went to jail to protect her, Juana. She lifted his keys one night, broke into the office and took five thousand dollars from the safe. Ed tried to pay it back but the examiners came too soon. He went up for her." Roxie whispered, half sobbing.

Johnny stared at her, his face hard.

"And then the dirty little nink kills herself without letting him off the hook. "Where was the money? Did she have it?"

Roxie's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "The money never turned up."

"Did she spend big? Did she drape in heavy feathers? Did she play the bangtails?"

"No," Roxie said. "She didn't have one penny left when she went."

Johnny nodded. "Like with Marky. Somebody got the bacon from Juana, maybe. Somebody put the lever to her and made her steal the five thousand. Does that read good?"

"Maybe. She told me once she was afraid, terribly afraid."

Johnny's eyes widened. He took her by the shoulders. "She had the shakes bad? She was scared to death?"

Roxie nodded. "Yes. Does it mean something?"

"Same thing with Marky. That's why she wanted Brad to leave El Camino Real."

Roxie put her hand to her mouth in wonder. "But, of course! Oh, Johnny! That's it! That's the link! Juana was afraid of El Camino Real, too! She told me that's where her trouble all started!"

Johnny closed his eyes and breathed deeply. It was the answer in a prayer. At last they were on to something. But what?

"That's why you came here, wasn't it, Roxie?" he asked gently.

"Yes," she whispered, her eyes lowered. "I want to find out why Juana killed herself. I want to free my brother from prison."

Johnny leaned over and kissed her softly on the cheek. "We will, doll," he said. "We will."

She lifted her hand to her cheek and gazed at him with wide open eyes. "Oh, Johnny," she said feebly.

And then she was gone.

7.

After the chaser the instruments were folded up in the boxes. Johnny searched for Roxie for a last smoke and a night walk to their respective pads. But he could not raise her. After her final number she had faded like the quick California twilight.

Johnny moseyed out of the *posada* and stood a moment on the rear deck looking out past the patio walls to the rolling swells of the terrain. Single lights twinkled at the missions. An occasional hubbly of laughter drifted to his ears.

In the parking lot someone switched on a pair of headlights, and Johnny shifted his gaze. The light came from the blood-red Comet. As he watched, it screeched rubber and made a tight U-turn in the lot, gliding by him under

the bright spotlight near the admissions office. He saw the two riders.

Salinas.

And Roxie Hall.

The car blasted off in a cloud of dust. Johnny Blue tapped a cigarette from his pack and lit up. He was not used to the strange feeling of loneliness that now moved in on him. He had never felt quite that way about any jennie wren before. He could take them or leave them.

He usually did both.

But Roxie Hall had something more than all the other bims he had known in the past. There was no putting a tag to it. It was something innate in her, a decency, an honesty, an integrity, a reality that the usual floozie just did not possess.

Whatever it was, it had penetrated to the heart of Johnny Blue. He had to admit it. And now she was in that blood-red Comet with Joel Salinas, the biggest wolf in El Camino Real. And the thought made Johnny's bones ache.

He walked through the front of the hotel and stood on the long covered colonnade extending the length of the *posada*. It was a quiet night. Stars twinkled, going on and off like the lights on a theater marquee. Blue Broadway some of the sidemen call the star-studded sky.

"Lonely, Johnny?" asked a voice from the shadows.

Johnny turned, startled. He had thought he was doing a single out there. But now he could see a dim form seated in a straight-backed chair against the wall of the *posada*.

Holly Salinas.

He ambled over to her. "Not any more," he said with a grin. "Cigarette?"

She nodded. "Maybe it'll help keep me warm."

He lit up for her and handed her the smoke. "You chilly?"

"Feeling the same way you are, Johnny, Lonesome and blue."

He stared down at her. He could see her more clearly now, once his eyes had become adjusted to the darkness. He saw the glow of her white skin, the lush curves of her face, the voluptuous turn of her breasts and hips and her

long legs crossed delicately in front of her, her skirt hitched up against her thighs.

"I've got a good recipe for the blues," he said.

Her eyebrows shot up. "I've always been considered a first-class chef."

"Take one female, one male and a Jag. Fold female and male into the latter, shake well, and blend with care."

"It tastes good already."

"Let's go," Johnny said, leaning over and taking her outstretched hand. She came up and stood by him, gazing at him with her wide eyes. She smiled, her lips cool and moist.

They walked together side by side in the desert air, just beginning to turn cold. They held hands like two children strolling home from third grade.

The smell of her hair and the subtle scent of her powder drifted to him. Once she stumbled on a loose rock in the gravel. Her breast touched his arm and he could feel its rounded contour. She did not draw back at all, but leaned against him a moment.

Then they moved on.

In the car she sighed, yawned and stretched out deliciously like a cat in front of a fireplace. She closed her eyes. He started the Jag and looked down at her. He saw the shape of her body in the dimness of the dashboard light. He saw her legs, her rounded thighs, her waist and the long deep cleft between her breasts. He saw the whiteness of her skin and the loveliness of her soft, placid face.

He drove out of the lot, down the highway and at the first turnoff he spun the Jag into an oiled roadway that topped a flat desert space and then dipped into a bowl-shaped declivity where three piñon trees grew high against the brilliant sky.

He stopped the car and they moved out like ghosts to sit on the pine needles under the piñons where they watched the stars a long time. And then they leaned back on the pine needles and he reached over and she lay back relaxed and desirable, and he moved down over her and the last thing he saw was the reflection of the desert starlight in her misty eyes.

They lay there half-dressed on the pine needles, looking up at the clean wide sky above them, warm in each other's arms.

"I knew you would be better than all the rest, Johnny," Holly said softly, raising herself on one elbow and looking down into his face.

"There's nobody like you, either, Holly," Johnny said with a smile. She was a wonderful animal. He could not put it in those words. And yet, that was the truth of the matter.

"I wanted you from the very first time I saw you come into the *posada*," said Holly, running her pink fingernail over Johnny's ear, down his bare chest, over his shoulder.

"I guess I knew that," Johnny said truthfully.

"But you played hard to get. Why?"

Johnny shrugged. "What's the pay-off? Salinas would open my veins if he knew I'd as much as looked at you."

She chuckled deep in her throat. "I think my dear husband has other game on his mind right now."

"Roxie?"

"Roxie. It's an even trade. I let him lead his life, he lets me lead mine." She laughed low in her throat, and lay back. Her breasts pushed out against her dress. She put her hands behind her head and sighed deeply.

"Why the sigh, Holly?"

"I think I'm getting tired of my dear husband, Johnny. You know? The same man, night after night. That gets to be a drag. And he makes a pass at every floozie who wiggles her bust at him. Maybe it's time I turned a few tricks on my own."

Johnny turned to her curiously. "And you figure I'm the boy to turn the tricks with. Is that it?"

Holly smiled. Her lips curved and her cheeks dimpled. She was a lush, gorgeously soft creature lying there in the pine needles under the silhouette of the three piñon trees. She was flesh and blood and sex and she was built for any man's arms. She was womanliness and desire and receptivity, all at once.

Johnny touched her breast, its tight mound rising to his

fingertips. He glanced at her eyes. She was watching him with amusement.

"You're all man, aren't you?" she smiled.

"Just as much as you're all woman."

She laughed. She turned to him and slid her face under his. They kissed for a long time, her lips warm and enveloping, her body pliant and magnetic. And the pine needles slithered and whispered beneath her, and Johnny moved against her, feeling her thighs and her hips and her body beneath his.

And in the midst of the darkness and the pulsating warmth of their flesh he thought he heard her whispered words:

"Come with me, Johnny, and I'll give you castles and riches and all the luxuries you'll ever want. Come with me, Johnny, and I'll buy you the world."

He knew she meant it.

And he could not answer her. He could not answer either yes or no.

11

JOHNNY DID NOT see Roxie at breakfast next morning at the *posada* coffee shop. He made no attempt to find her. It was best to let sleeping dogs lie. He had the edge on her, anyway. He had seen her out with Salinas. And she had not seen him out with Holly. Score: five-love.

How, Johnny wondered, did he really feel about Roxie? His feelings about Holly were clear, as they were with Marky and that crazy nympho Monica Stone. A woman was a woman, to be taken when the time for taking was ripe.

But with Roxie, Johnny's emotions had undergone a change. Roxie was her own woman. She was no pushover. She knew what she wanted and she would get it one way or another.

Funny, Johnny thought absently, sipping his coffee. You remembered the women you had in your life as a blur of pounding excitement, of raging desire, of frenzied

clutching, and of peace and quiet and satiation. The faces became indistinguishable. The bodies merged into one great all-consuming feminine receptacle. The arms and legs and lips and breasts and hips became the all-female symbol. There was no specific individual after awhile, simply a remembered pleasure, nebulous, exhilarating and evanescent.

But the ones you had not had were those you recalled vividly, their faces, their bodies, their skin tones.

Johnny could describe every turn of Roxie Hall's face, the twist of her eyelashes, the transparency of her ear lobes, the tiny lines beside her eyes, the thrust of her breasts, the whiteness of her throat, the velvet of her lips.

He smoked a cigarette, paid the *mozo* and climbed in the Jag. It was a bright sunshiny day. He felt good. His pleasure-making the night before had left his head clear; the wine of exhilaration flowed through his veins.

He gunned out down the highway and headed for Cholla City. There were one or two things he wanted to discuss with Sheriff Storm, as, for example, the Marky Samson case and, as another, the Brad Samson case. He also wanted to discuss Salinas and Holly and other aspects of El Camino Real. A real summit meeting, to be more productive than most, Johnny hoped.

He parked the Jag outside the sheriff's office and stepped in the drugstore for a pack of cigarettes before facing down the law. It was in the drugstore at the cash register that he saw the familiar little face beaming up at him from his shoulder.

"Hi, you great big beautiful hunk of man. Where you been hiding all that manhood for the last two bed-downs?"

Monica Stone.

"Hi, Stone-Face. What's with all the little popovers? I've been blowing up a good piano out at the *posada*. Where have you been? Grinding Gus Deane's tape machine?"

Monica grinned. "I've been having myself a ball."

"I'll bet. Anyone I know?"

She pouted. "That was a nasty blast-off, Johnny." She giggled. "You know you're my one and only!"

"What else is new?" Johnny laughed.

"How was your trip north?" Monica asked, her nose upturned, her eyes gleaming.

He stared at her. She winkered at his surprise.

"You old snoop, you," Johnny said. "Don't you know what curiosity did to the cat?"

"But that cat wasn't hip, Johnny," Monica said.

"What else do you know about my trip north?"

"Nothing," Monica said after a moment. "Except that you got back."

"Who sicked you on me, Monica? Same old party?"

She nodded. "Same old party."

"The Chamber of Commerce, Gus Deane," muttered Johnny Blue. He pulled open the pack of cigarettes in his hand and shook one free. "I'd offer you a smoke if I thought you were old enough."

She stamped her foot. He handed her one and lit it up for her. They walked out into the sunlit street.

"Where's the Bank?" Johnny asked suddenly.

Monica's eyes widened, then went crafty. "You planning to make a withdrawal?"

Johnny grinned. "Maybe I'll open a special checking account."

2.

The office was done in mahogany veneered panels, rubbed walnut veneered desks, shelves of imitation leather-bound books and a nylon rug. Everything was fake except for the air of low-keyed intimacy. That was as real as Gus Deane.

The big man sat opposite Johnny Blue, his face wreathed in smiles, his blue eyes staring straight into Johnny's.

"Sure I had you tailed, Blue. That's my job."

Johnny sat forward an inch or two in his chair, alert. His face stiffened. "You admit it?"

The big man leaned back and stared at the ceiling. He was a fat man, a man with a round bulbous face, a man with fat hands and fat shoulders and fat cheeks. He smiled and his whole face moved into circles. He laughed and his body bounced up and down like cold tomato aspic.

Gus Deane, professional fat man and happy boy. Gus Deane, friend of the underprivileged and servant of the

overprivileged. Gus Deane, heavy friend of Johnny Blue and El Camino Real.

"Sure I admit it, Blue. In a battle like this, a man needs skirmishers out to scout the action." The blue eyes glinted.

"I don't get it, Deane," Johnny snapped. "I'm no cheap hood. I'm no con artist. What do you have against me?"

Gus Deane stood up and moved over to the windows of the subdued room, glancing out into the sunshine on Main Street.

"We got us a town out there, Blue, a nice little town with a lot of nice people in it. God-fearing and church-going, most of them. With kids growing up and more on the way. Some smart, some dumb, some lazy, some eager."

"So you got cross-section, U. S. A.," Johnny snapped. "What else is new?"

Gus Deane's blue eyes narrowed. "Sure, we're Bible-belt hicks, to you, Blue. You and your hotshot hipsters from L. A. and Frisco. Us, we're the little guys. The easy pickings."

Johnny lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "Father grab him!" he murmured.

"What's that?" Gus Deane asked, frowning.

"Makes no never-mind," Johnny said. "I get the picture. This is God's Little Acre, right here in Cholla City. And you want us out of it. Your own garbage don't have flies on it."

The fat man scowled and then smiled. "That's it, Blue. You've pounded the nail on the head. El Camino Real and Johnny Blue's combo mean trouble for us. They downgrade the area. We don't like Salinas and his gambling hell so close in. Why, it's getting so every Hollywood executive with a yen for a frail comes speeding to Salinas' Call Girl Roadhouse and rents himself a pad for a night."

Johnny winced. What Gus Deane said was close to the truth. There had been hints of assignations and hook-shopping at El Camino Real. Maybe Gus Deane was a straight gee for real.

"What price victory, Mr. Deane?" Johnny said. "Suppose you do succeed in running out Salinas and me. What takes its place?"

The fat man considered. "Nothing. We root out the weeds and we let the garden grow clean."

"Leave it to the blue-noses," sighed Johnny. "I can see your point." His eyes bored into Deane's. "But one thing I don't cherish."

Deane's eyebrows came up.

"I don't like your hired yahoos trying to slice me up with those toadstabbers they carry in their jeans! Keep them off. If you don't, I'll come down here and make a special deposit right in the seat of your pants."

Gus Deane eyed Johnny carefully. "You're everything we don't like in people, Blue," Gus Deane said slowly. "That's why us honest citizens have to root out the evil you people spawn."

"Evil!" snarled Johnny. "It's not evil to bash in a man's face and rip his teeth out by the roots so he can never blow a horn again? It's not evil to stomp the hand bones of a drummer boy so he can never beat the skins again? It's not evil to kill and maim and cut and ice-pack under a shield of do-good respectability?"

Gus Deane's eyes burned brightly. "I don't know what you're talking about, Blue."

"The hell you don't, you yellow-dog lick-penny. It was you who maimed Brad Samson, you who tromped Skinhead Bates. Don't try to three-sheet me it wasn't."

Gus Deane shook his head emphatically. "I did no such thing, Blue!"

Johnny stood up and glared at Gus Deane a long moment. Then he moved quickly to the huge walnut desk and leaned on it. "It was your gang of teen-age terrorists, Deane. And if I see one of them, or you, around any of my boys again, you'd better be wearing a bullet-proof vest. Because I'm going to take it on myself to give you a lesson in warfare, if that's what you want!"

Leaving Gus Deane in his chair trembling from rage and frustration, Johnny Blue wheeled, opened the door and stamped angrily out of the banker's oak-paneled office.

3.

She was seated in the Jaguar waiting for him when he came out. He climbed in and sat behind the wheel a long time before he could control the trembling that assailed his arms and legs.

"I'm a virus that affects the puritanical and alabaster virtue of Cholla City," Johnny snapped to Monica Stone. "I'm a malignancy that must be excised. I'm a disease, a plague, an evil too awful to cope with. I must be eradicated totally!"

Monica Stone shook her head. "He does go on."

He stared at her. "Narrow-minded political hacks like Gus Deane are one of the big things wrong with this country, Monica. They're a danger to every community. They take everything into consideration except the most important thing of all, the human element."

Monica sighed. "I know all about him. Let's not discuss Gus Deane, huh? Let's discuss Johnny Blue."

"Before I'm to be eradicated like a pest?" Johnny grinned wryly.

"Take me for a ride in the jalopy," Monica said suddenly. "It's a beautiful day."

Johnny grinned and started the Jag. He pulled out from the curb and headed down the Main Street of town in the direction of El Camino Real.

"Up in the hills, Johnny. You ever been to the top of San Gorgonio?"

"No. Like to take a spin?"

"Love it!" she cooed, and snuggled down in the seat beside him. "Lay on, MacBlue!"

"We're off!" he cried and gunned the car down the main drag. A signal just ahead of them, the last one before the highway broke out into the desert, turned red and he braked gently with the intention of bringing the Jag to a stop.

A split second later Johnny pressed his foot down further but the brake failed to respond. He pushed it to the floor. There was still no reaction. The Jag kept on going full speed down Main Street, heading for the intersection, the signal still against it.

"Johnny!" cried Monica. "The signal's red! Johnny!"

But the Jag brakes were completely out of control. Johnny, working frantically, slammed the Jag in'o lower gear but they were only yards from the intersection now. He swerved the wheel, trying to avoid hitting a car coming out of the cross street.

Johnny missed the car but slammed into a fire hydrant on the curb.

The Jag shuddered to a stop, the engine dead. Monica Stone bounced off the windshield and slumped in the seat beside him, bleeding from a wound in the forehead.

Water geysered up in front of them like Niagara. The hydrant had broken.

Johnny Blue, shaking and gray-faced, clambered out of the car, raced around and dragged Monica out. Blood oozed from the girl's face wound. He pulled her out to the sidewalk, slipping and sliding on the ankle-deep water surrounding them.

She opened her enormous eyes, staring at him wildly. Her face was white.

"I didn't do it, Johnny!" she cried. "I didn't!"

Johnny Blue froze. Do it, she had said. Had she set him up? Anger surged in him. The brake failure was no accident. Someone had caused it. And Monica knew who had.

Or had she just been guessing?

Whoever had done it wanted one thing and one thing only—an immediate end to the life of Johnny Blue.

Immediate. If not sooner.

4.

Johnny found Andy Orr in his own pad that afternoon trying to keep cool with a fan blowing on the wet towels around his waist and head.

"You wanted me, kid?" Johnny asked, sitting down opposite the sax man and studying the air-conditioning arrangement he had rigged up.

Andy Orr looked embarrassed. "You didn't need to come to me, Johnny. That's kind of turning the protocol upside down. I'm a sideman, you're the leader. I go to you."

"Never mind," said Johnny. "What's the bug?"

"I hear you wrapped the Jag around a fire hydrant this morning," Andy said, dreamily, his eyes half-closed.

"News travels fast."

"Especially bad news," Andy nodded. "What happened?"

"You mean, was it an accident?"

"You read me, five by five."

"It was no accident. The brake rod was sawed more than halfway through with a hacksaw."

Andy's eyes narrowed. "Somebody fitted you for the wooden kimona."

"It looks that way to Sheriff Storm."

"It figures," Andy sighed. "I didn't want to push the panic button too soon but now I have to."

"Panic button?"

"The grapevine has it that you're as good as planted, Johnny. The daisies are growing and all they need is nourishment."

"My mouldering remains." Johnny ground his teeth together. "Who told you?"

"The grapevine," Andy said again, evasively.

Johnny nodded. The fag grapevine was more fact than fiction. Johnny knew that in the music business as well as in show business and every other kind of entertainment racket, the fags stuck together in a tight clique for protection as well as for friendship. And when they got news of one kind or another, they passed it on. If Andy had heard Johnny Blue's life was in danger, it was a fact.

"Who has marked me?" Johnny asked, finally.

"Information is inconclusive. But they're after you."

"Why?"

"Something to do with our stand here at El Camino Real," Andy said shortly. "That's all I can say, Johnny."

Johnny nodded and stood up. "That's plenty. I'm afraid you're two hundred percent right. Thanks for the tip."

Andy waved his hand negligently. "Easy does it."

Johnny opened the door. "Yeah," he said wryly, and went out.

5.

Looking forward to the pleasantly cool shade under the pepper trees on the patio behind the *posada*, Johnny climbed the sandy hill in back, smelling the pungent scent of the juniper trees and the tangy hard smell of sage through the dry, dusty heat all around him.

Joel Salinas was sitting in a big chair in the flagstone patio, talking to Roxie Hall. They were sipping drinks

from tall glasses. Johnny came in, saw them together and almost turned away.

Then he swallowed his surprise and grinned. "Siesta time?"

Salinas smiled, eyeing Johnny searchingly. "Sit down, Blue. I've got a job for you."

Johnny moved toward them slowly, glancing briefly at Roxie. She looked at him but did not speak.

Salinas waved Johnny to a chair opposite them.

"Heard you had trouble with your Jag," Salinas said after a moment.

Johnny shot a hard glance at him. The dark eyes were interested but they gave away no secrets. If this man had actually done the job of sabotage himself, Johnny could not have divined by his look, anyway.

"Had a little wreck in town," Mr. Blue said.

"Everything okay now?" Salinas said, eyeing Johnny's hands.

"Oh, sure," Johnny said, looking down. His eyes moved quickly to Salinas' face. "I've still got my hands. That what you mean?"

Salinas' face twisted into a smile. "Seeing as how two of your players seem to have been maimed in critical areas of their musical anatomy, I just wanted to check."

Johnny's eyes narrowed. The heat rose in him. "Why do you ask?"

"It's for the job I want you to do tonight."

"During dancing hours?"

"After."

"Sorry," Johnny said slowly, measuring the words. "After the chaser, my time is my own."

"This pays extra."

Johnny eyed Salinas. "Oh," He considered. "Whole band?"

"Just you."

"Piano obbligato?"

Salinas nodded. "Two o'clock in the morning. See you at the office upstairs."

Johnny looked from Salinas to Roxie. She was seated there drinking coolly from her tall frosted glass, paying not the slightest bit of attention to either of the men.

"You got yourself a piano player," Johnny nodded and

turned to go. As he did so Roxie lifted her blue eyes to his face and smiled.

"Hi, Johnny." She lifted her hand. He noticed a jangling charm bracelet around her wrist.

He moved toward her, taking her wrist in his hand.

"Baubles?"

She smiled. "Compliments of Mr. Salinas."

Johnny glanced at the dark-faced man. "In lieu of raise?"

Roxie flushed and drew her hand away.

Salinas chuckled and tipped the long cool glass in his hand to his mouth. "You dig love-charm, keyboard man?"

Johnny looked at the charm bracelet a long moment and then stalked from the patio.

6.

At five minutes of two, after a shower and a midnight shave, Johnny wandered into Joel Salinas' office upstairs. The room was deserted. In five minutes Salinas entered. He glanced at his wrist-watch.

"You're early, Blue."

"Bad night. I'm hurrying the beat."

"Band sounded fair to middling," Salinas said, as if the words hurt him.

"We played those waltzes just for you."

Salinas tossed back his sleek head and laughed. "It's a commercial enterprise with me, Blue. I've got a tin ear."

"I take it you consider that information a last-minute news flash."

Salinas' face darkened perceptibly. He jerked his thumb at Johnny. "Up, bandboy. You're coming with me."

"Should I have brought my music?"

"This is strictly for noodling," Salinas said. "Background stuff."

"Background for what?" Johnny wanted to know.

Salinas went out into the hallway again and down a long corridor. "Ever been to an auction?"

Johnny frowned. "Sure. What kind of antiques are you selling?"

Salinas chuckled. "Antiques, hell. You'll see."

They entered a door at the end of the corridor. Letters

were printed in gold: *Teatro*. Johnny had never been up here before. The game room lay to their back, and the living quarters where Holly and Salinas stayed were far to the other end of the *posada*. The *teatro* was at the back end of the building.

It was a room about forty feet by forty feet, shaped in the form of a small, intimate theater. The audience sat in easy chairs lined diagonally to the square.

In one of the corners a small stage was built about a foot above the floor. To the right of this stood the piano. A spotlight in faint blue played shimmeringly over the stage. A door, closed now, gave on to the stage from the back so that the performers could enter from the back and exit the same way.

Johnny turned to Salinas and frowned.

Salinas winked conspiratorially. He indicated the piano.

"That's where you blow, Blue."

"When do I play? And what?"

"Music. Nostalgic stuff. The kind of music you hear at the far end of a swank night club in New York."

Johnny shrugged. "If you say so."

"The auctioneer will tell you when to stop."

"Who's the auctioneer?"

"Me," said Salinas with a lascivious smile. "Sit down and give us some mood."

Johnny nodded and walked over to the piano. Several men were seated in the soft easy chairs already, peering with veiled interest at the still vacant stage.

Then Johnny glanced back in a double-take at one of the men seated there. Johnny could have sworn the man was Gene Savage, the Hollywood director, the big man from Iowa who had turned the film colony on its upside by his antics with wine, women, and song. He was reputed the world over to be one of the biggest flesh hounds in the world. What in hell was he doing at El Camino Real? Johnny asked himself. Especially in Salinas' private theater?

Johnny shrugged.

Strange were the ways of movie directors.

As he started playing the piano Johnny wondered vaguely if he might not approach Savage and try to cook up some kind of a movie ragout for his cumber. But af

course, he realized, Savage must be approached once every half hour by ambitious kids. And most of those kids who faced him had a lot better equipment than Johnny Blue had—beautiful eyes and shapely bosoms, for instance.

That was the kind of merchandise Savage loved to sample.

As time passed, other men drifted into the *teatro*. Soon it became quite full. Smoke from the cigars and cigarettes hung in the air like vapor at a steam bath and it was beginning to hurt Johnny's eyes. He noodled through all the old numbers he could dredge up from the bottom of his memory, casting his eyes out over the audience.

Eyes that saw.

It was a strange thing, Johnny thought, but there seemed to be a kind of subdued anticipation in the faces of these men. There seemed to be an unstated, submerged excitement churning and boiling beneath the surface. It was almost a palpable essence he could feel in the air.

They were loaded, these customers. Now that the room was full, Johnny could tell that only the very richest clients of El Camino Real had come to this shindig. As a matter of fact, Johnny doubted if half these men were actually in residence. They seemed to be commuters selected from the top echelons of the business world in Los Angeles, San Diego, Hollywood and perhaps even San Francisco. Their clothes were cut in the latest style. There were shoes that cost seventy-five dollars a pair. There were silk stockings. Undoubtedly there were silk undershirts and shorts.

The faces were uniform, somehow. Clean-shaven, self-satisfied, the eyes piercing and shrewd, the noses high and tilted up. These were big men, successful men, affluent men. And they were sybarites, each and everyone of them.

Over the entire group hung the tawdry decadence and the tired boredom that came with too good living. It was almost as if these men had assembled in the *teatro* of Joel Salinas for special kicks.

Auction . . . Johnny mused. What kind of an auction? he wondered.

Salinas appeared behind Johnny. Johnny glanced back over his shoulder.

"You know *Lady of the Evening*?" Salinas asked quietly.

Johnny nodded.

"Play it, maestro," Salinas said, his lips curving in a sardonic smile.

Puzzled, Johnny went into *Lady of the Evening* and as he did so the house lights in the teatro began to dim. In a moment there was no light at all except on the tiny stage in the corner of the room.

A hush fell over the audience. Every eye in the room was turned to the tiny stage. Johnny Blue had the sudden absurd idea that the greatest comedian of all time was about to step out on the stage, or the greatest opera singer, or the greatest man on earth.

Maybe even a man from Mars.

He was wrong.

Salinas moved closer to the stage until the spotlight had picked out his face with its flickering blue light.

"Gentlemen," Salinas smiled, "Exhibit A."

With that Salinas rapped with his knuckles on the wall behind him. Johnny continued playing and watched Salinas. He watched the oily man's eyes glittering like poisonous pools in his face, watched his mustache lifting slightly, watched the suppressed excitement there.

Absently, Johnny glanced out over the audience, and got a severe shock.

It was as if every man in that group were holding his breath in excruciating suspense. It was as if every man were momentarily paralyzed, unable to breathe, unable to move, unable to speak. Johnny was still staring in deep concern out over the sea of agitated faces when the stage door in the wall opened. He did not see at first what had stepped through.

But he saw the reaction on the faces of the seated men. It was a frightening thing. It was as if the entire group had suddenly become one animal, one seething, expectant, snarling beast, one lustful, lecherous, drooling organism.

Shocked, Johnny twisted around to look up toward the stage.

She wore black net stockings up to her thighs, a black G-string, and a black domino mask over her eyes.

That was all.

In the shimmering spotlight, her skin glowed as if it were a living presence all itself. Her breasts were tipped with red, and her hips were tapered in to her waist and her thighs were rounded and soft. She stood there gracefully, posing slightly and looking out over the audience with a wistful smile on her coral-tinted lips.

She was a gorgeously stacked girl, a classic figure, a body to excite even the most sluggish of male hormones.

A gasp ran through the crowd.

"Five hundred!" shouted a male voice.

"A thousand!" screamed another.

"Fifteen hundred!"

Salinas gestured to Johnny to stop playing.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" he cried, lifting his hand over the audience. "It's a fine start, but I don't think your figures are quite realistic. For this gorgeous specimen of feminine pulchritude, I cannot accept any sum under—" here Salinas paused for a dramatic effect "—under two thousand dollars!"

"Two thousand!" a voice cried immediately.

Salinas grinned. "Do I hear a higher figure for this charming lass? This lovely girl who will be your Bride for the Night! Gentlemen! Gentlemen! Do I hear three thousand?"

He did not hear it.

Then after a moment of breathless silence, someone cried out, "Twenty-five hundred!"

"Do I hear any higher?" Salinas shouted, his eyes bright and on fire. "Do I hear twenty-seven fifty?"

There was no sound.

"Very well." Salinas turned to the girl. "Going at twenty-five hundred! Going at twenty-five hundred! Gone at twenty-five hundred dollars to the man in the third row center!"

Johnny gazed out over the sea of faces.

Even now the "lucky man" was bounding up toward the stage in a disgustingly fervid manner, pushing between chairs and grinning like a monkey in the zoo at feeding time.

Johnny turned away. The whole thing was so repugnant he could hardly keep from throwing up.

With his clammy, sweaty paws around the girl's clean body, the Number One Groom of the Night stepped through the back door with his prize and vanished from sight.

Sweat beaded Johnny Blue's face. He was breathing heavily. His face was white. Salinas was looking at him with amusement. He had counted on shocking Johnny with the Auction, with this Bride for the Night. Salinas had certainly succeeded.

If Johnny had known what he was to play piano for, he never would have come to this shindig. He would have quit.

Salinas was snapping his fingers. Johnny turned around. He was curing Johnny to start playing again.

Doggedly, trying to keep his anger in check, Johnny turned to the key board. He had made a deal. He could not welch, no matter how bad this hideous flesh auction was.

He kept his head down.

Salinas knocked on the wall. The stage door opened. Johnny glanced up, absolutely unable to keep his eyes from the nude girl even though he used every ounce of will-power.

The girl stepped out into the shimmering light, now changed from blue to gold. She stepped out and stood there in crimson net stockings, a crimson G-string and a crimson domino over her eyes. She had blonde hair that shone like gold in the spotlight.

Salinas was watching Johnny closely, a half smile on his mouth.

Johnny's eye fell to the girl's wrist.

A golden charm bracelet jangled there, tinkling, making a musical counterpoint to the girl's fluid movements.

He recognized that bracelet. He had seen it only this afternoon.

Roxie!

A great seething red flame enveloped Johnny Blue. He had no idea what he did, what he said, what he thought. He knew only that he leaped up from the piano, screaming at Salinas, that he plowed across the intervening space between them, lunging at Salinas, tearing for his throat, grasping at his clothes.

He knew that Salinas pulled back, signalled toward the rear of the *teatro* and ducked away from Johnny. Almost

instantly strong arms gripped Johnny Blue from behind. A growling voice rumbled in his ear. Johnny recognized the guttural explosives of Art Feist, Salinas' chief bouncer.

The girl on the platform screamed. She screamed once and then she screamed again.

Johnny tried to turn but felt himself propelled quickly and decisively toward the door by Art Feist. One hand gripped his neck, the other the seat of his trousers.

The bum's rush.

Feist opened the door and shoved Johnny into the hallway. Then the door slammed shut. Johnny was alone in the hall.

Roxie! he thought.

He moved for the door, reaching out his hand and jiggling the knob. It was locked. He tried it again. Nothing.

From inside the *teatro* he heard the loud guffaw of laughter; then, silence.

Laughter at Johnny Blue's preposterous and undignified exit.

He stood there, furious, alone, fuming. He saw Roxie's face like some kind of flaming legend in the blackness of his mind.

Roxie the inviolate.

Roxie the beautiful.

Roxie the lousy little lay.

12

JOHNNY BLUE SAT back with a sigh, spread his empty hands out in front of him and shook his head.

"Well, boys, let's take it out and look at it. The long and short of it is this: I blew it."

Andy Orr frowned. "From the looks of you, Johnny, I'd say it blew you."

Johnny winced. "So we're at liberty again. On the rods. I've got our walking papers, signed, sealed and delivered. And all because of a little argument I had with our beloved boniface last night."

"What's the other guy look like?" Ambles Bennett asked with a grunt of curiosity.

"Not too bad. Actually, he had thirty-five guys on his side."

"So we're on the mooch again, huh?" Pats Sprvak said. "That's life."

"Sorry, boys, that I loused it up. But I never thought we were working a call house. Hell, if I'd known that, I'd have demanded a slice of the take."

"Hoo hab," sighed the new drummer, a pickup named Sticks MacShane. "Back to the burlesque circuit. What's left of it."

Johnny grunted and ordered more coffee. They were seated in the café adjoining the *posada*. When the coffee came, Johnny gave the sidemen a graphic description of the auction upstairs the night before. And he told them how Salinas had fired him the minute the auction was over.

"Take it on the mope," he tells me," Johnny concluded. "'You and that crummy combo of yours. All you give me since you came here is trouble. Don't come back!' I kind of got the impression he meant it."

Andy Orr shrugged. "It's been a miserable basket of eggs ever since we hit this fleabag. Breads or no breads, Brad. Skinhead. And now you. I'd say we made it out just in time."

Johnny nodded. "Something stinking is brewing in the pot. I wish I could get close enough to it to sniff it out."

"Think it's got something to do with this Auction Night?" Andy asked casually.

"You mean, maybe Brad found out about it and wanted to get Marky out of the place, knowing she was kind of wild and out for lease?" Johnny suddenly got a glow of excitement.

Andy shrugged. "Could be."

"Indeed it could be," Johnny continued rapidly. "Maybe that was the reason Brad got clobbered. Say he threatened Salinas he would blow the whistle on him."

"It's thin," Andy said dubiously.

"But after Brad made Cloud Nine, Marky got panicky, tried to roll one of the square Johns at El Camino Real

for bus fare out and wound up in Dreamsville via Pill City."

"If Brad was able to talk, he could nail it down," Fats Spivak said. "You heard from the hospital, Johnny?"

Johnny shook his head. "No. And Marky's still in a bad way. They're both what is called 'incommunicado'."

Andy shrugged. "Well then, there goes the old ball game."

"Not necessarily," Johnny Blue said. "I've got a kookie idea. See you around." He grinned. "Maybe."

And he was out the chair and through the door before the sideman even looked up.

2.

At high noon Johnny Blue jumped out of the repaired Jag and headed for the Cholla City sheriff's office. He found Dustin Storm without any trouble at all. The sheriff was working a wooden toothpick over his molars thoughtfully, and waving the heat off his face.

"Well, well," said Storm, his eyes lighting up with interest, "if it isn't Johann S. Bach."

"Not any more, I'm afraid," Johnny grinned.

Storm grimaced. "They didn't like your music at El Camino Real?"

"The melody was all right," Johnny said. "But the counterpoint didn't score."

Storm nodded. "I heard there was some kind of a discord."

"Yeah. Funny you heard. I guess things get around."

"Certain things," said Storm carefully.

"And you didn't hear about the Auction?"

Storm raised his eyebrows carefully, his leather face seeming as innocent as a new-born child's. "Auction? Some ancient Indian artifacts discovered in the acreage?"

"Yeah," Johnny said. "Artifacts. But not ancient. It was a strange kind of an auction."

"So?"

"Salinas was auctioning off girls."

Storm stared. "Girls?"

"He's what's known in the trade as a flesh peddler. Only he peddles it like a slave sale to inflate the prices."

Storm smiled calculatedly. "Hard to believe, amigo."

"Even for me," Johnny nodded vigorously. "And I saw it."

"Ain't been puffing pot, have you, ivory-flicker? I hear it's a kind of an occupational hazard with you fellows."

Johnny's eyes slitted down. So Storm was going to take it that way, was he? And there was absolutely nothing Johnny could do about it.

"I saw it, Storm, with my own eyes. You want a tape recording?"

Storm shook his head. "Even if you had it, amigo, it wouldn't be admissable in court."

"The hell with that!" Johnny exploded. "I know what Salinas runs. It's a call-girl set-up that's pouring millions in on him. He gets these innocent kids down there on the pretense or other and then auctions off their bodies to the highest bidder. How much more proof do you need? I saw it! I'll swear to it!"

Storm shrugged. "Pure spite, Johnny. That's what they'd say."

"Who'd say?" snapped Johnny.

"The smart lawyers Salinas would hire to get him off the hook."

Johnny stared. The sweat began to pour out on his skin.

"You mean you're not going to bust up that sex ring he's operating out there? You mean—"

Storm held up his hand. "I got your word for it, Johnny," Storm said sadly. "More than that I ain't got. What do I do? Manacle Salinas, push him in the pokey for a night and then say goodbye to him in the a.m. when his legal talent springs him? After that, what's left for me? I say bye-bye to my friends, my badge and maybe even my own skin. Who knows? It's a tough life, Johnny. You live yours and I'll live mine."

Johnny Blue stared at the floor. It was sickening to look at Sheriff Storm. A man without guts under his empty hide is not a pleasant sight to see. A hulk of a man. A shadow. A cipher.

"So he's got you in his pocket too?" Johnny whispered.

Storm raised his head, and Johnny saw the haggard, hopeless face, the sunken eye-sockets, the colorless skin.

"Johnny, I got a wife who's not young any more, and a little ranch house on the outskirts of town. I've got a kid in college, and a girl who's seventeen and trying to get into Stanford. I've got a little bit of scratch in the bank and maybe if I'm careful I can retire when I'm sixty-five and live on my social security. Other than that I ain't got one penny. You want me to sell out my wife and kids?"

Johnny breathed deeply. He could think of nothing fitting to say.

"I'm an old man, Johnny, old before my time," Storm went on. "The big boys have rolled rocks over me and stamped me into the ground. Maybe if I'd had more guts, it would have been different. I don't know. But right now I'm in no shape I should start leaning on them. They would smash me into raspberry jam."

Johnny closed his eyes.

"Now go away from me, Johnny Blue, and leave a poor old wizened up son-of-a-bitch to his midnight thoughts. Will you, please, before I unlimber that blacksnake whip and dehide you?"

Johnny grinned flatly. He stood up.

"Yeah," he said suddenly. "Of course. That's the answer. Salinas owns you. He owns you and he owns Cholla City. But he can't show his hand because the fat-cat citizens of Cholla City would never stand for their sheriff and bank to be puppet-run by a flesh peddler from the flatlands. And the money he buys you with is hush money so he can keep on operating. Isn't it?"

Storm shook his head feebly. "Hit the road, Johnny."

"Gus Deane and you, plus Salinas. A beautiful set-up. All three of you in it together and pretending to fight it out with that gang of teen-age hoods. They make a beautiful smokescreen to cover up the filthy, lousy, stinking, grafting mess underneath. Don't they, Storm?"

Johnny Blue moved quickly to the door and strode through it. Once in the street the sun smote him viciously on the back. He turned and looked in through the dirty window at Sheriff Dustin Storm.

But Storm had not moved. He was as motionless as a dead man, staring into space with those self-loathing, tortured eyes.

Johnny Blue sat in the Jag a moment, staring into the sunlit sidewalk. It was a depressing thought. The law was in Salinas' pocket. The law, and the bank of Cholla City. Salinas called all the shots, then. He ran the town. And he pretended to fight the town. Gus Deane saw to that with his teen gang. They attacked, all right. But only innocent bystanders like Johnny Blue. They never took on Joel Salinas.

The injustice of it all boiled up in Johnny Blue. He had a gripe against Salinas and he had no judges to hear him. There was only one course of action open to take.

He had to straighten things out himself.

The do-it-yourself man of El Camino Real, he thought with a wry grin.

He remembered Marky. A fundamentally clean kid who had sprung off on the wrong foot somewhere and had never really bounded back despite her marriage to Brad Samson.

He thought of Ed Hall, Rozie's brother, and his wife Juana, a clean kid who had also apparently gotten involved in something bigger than she was, and had been engulfed by it. She had ruined her husband's life and then she had taken her own rather than face the thing pursuing her.

And then, irrelevantly, he thought of the three girls who had come walking down the wide stairs with Holly Salinas one hot afternoon at the posada. They, too, were clean kids, nice young girls.

Like the bodies on the auction block. Like the expensive flesh Salinas peddled.

It hit him like a lightning bolt. In a flash he had it all pieced together, the mystery, the fiendish subtlety of it, the ingenuity and the foolproofness of the scheme.

He thought of Marky, Juana and Salinas' nieces, and then he thought of El Camino Real, Marky's trouble, Brad's accident and Johnny's own Jag wreck, and Mr. Blue knew why the powers were trying to get rid of him. They were not trying to eliminate him for purposes of cover, really, but for something more serious. And that same serious reason had led the powers to attempt to

get rid of Brad Samson and, for that matter, Ed Hall.

It made such a neat Mondrian when the pieces fitted in, when the dots and lines and squares came together in one final, complete, excruciating masterpiece of intrigue.

What a jerk and peasant slave he had been! But no longer.

He had to act. He knew that for sure. He had to take the law into his own hands. And act.

It would take devious means.

The roundabout way was the trail the one-man vigilante committee called the Johnny Blue Committee had to take.

4.

In the Cholla City Bank, Johnny found Monica Stone without any trouble at all.

She looked up at him and blanched.

"Go away from me," she cried. "Don't you think I've had enough trouble already?" She touched the bandage over her ear.

"Hello, Monica," Johnny said. "Don't you like me anymore?"

"I need you like I need the hole I've already got in my head," she moaned. "Do me a favor and lose sight of me."

"No," Johnny said seriously. "Come with me. I'll buy you a drink."

"But I can't drink during working hours."

"These aren't working hours," Johnny said. "These are praying hours. Use them. They may be your last."

The girl's face went gray. "What do you mean? I don't understand you, Johnny."

"They almost got us yesterday in that Jag. Do you want to try for a six foot excavation next time, Monica?"

Monica blinked her eyes. "Me?" she squealed.

Johnny's face was hard. "Drink?"

"Why not?" she said, her voice trembling.

They walked out of the bank. One of the clerks stared at them as they left. He said nothing.

Down the street in a bar called El Turco, Johnny sat across from Monica and saluted her with the screwdriver.

"Drink it down, kitten," he admonished her. "What I'm going to tell you isn't pleasant."

"All you ever sing is the blues, Johnny," Monica said sadly. "I don't know why I was ever attracted to you. It must be my death wish."

"You got mixed up with me because you were paid to, remember?" Johnny chided.

Monica shrugged. "If you must be crude about it."

"Gus Deane, the white hope of Cholla City. The knight in shining armor aboard the white charger." Johnny Blue leaned back in his chair and laughed. "Bull!"

Monica's face froze. "Just because you can't understand why a man would fight for a clean government and a decent place to live!" she snapped.

"Deane?" Johnny repeated, laughing. "Gus Deane?"

"Yes, sir!" Monica bridled. "My boss!"

"You don't really know the setup?" Johnny asked, leaning forward and speaking the words in a low, intimate voice.

Monica's eyes widened. "What setup?"

"The setup between your bright and glittering Gus Deane and the biggest flesh peddler in the southwest, Joel Salinas."

"But they detest each other," Monica said, her voice quivering. "They can't stand each other's company!"

"No. Maybe not. In front, like we say it in the music business. But behind, chicken, in the back, in the secret dark rooms, they're tied up tighter than a boy scout knot."

Monica was wetting her lips nervously with her tongue. "You don't really mean it, do you Johnny?" Her voice had a pleading, desperate tone to it.

"Figure it out for yourself. This town's not made of money. But there's plenty of scratch here. You can smell it. Gus Deane is prosperous. So is the bank. And El Camino Real mints gold. That stuff has been building your gorgeous little city, Monica. Blood money has made Cholla City what it is today!"

Monica bit her lip. "No," she said feebly.

"Not no. Yes. My boy Brad Sarasin found it out. He found it out because his wife must have been one of Joel Salinas' call girls. You probably don't know about that

call girl racket he works in back of the jazzy façade of Spanish mission architecture."

Monica closed her eyes.

"And Brad tried to get his wife out of there before there was trouble," Johnny continued. "Salinas thought Brad knew the whole story and he went after him. He almost killed Brad. He did put him out of commission, forever."

Johnny chewed on his lip a moment. He drank some more of the vodka and orange juice.

"There's more evidence, Monica. I saw the assignation room last night. That's why I'm here now."

"But," Monica said softly, "did you go to the police?"

"Storm?" Johnny nodded bitterly "I went to Storm. He's in Salinas' pocket, too."

"Oh, no," murmured Monica.

"And there may be one more thing you don't know about."

Monica's eyes were wide. "What else?"

"Me. You think of me as a band leader. One of those comical guys who beats the eighty-eights and makes noise pay off."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Monica said with a feeble try at blinking her eyes flirtatiously. "I think you're kind of cute, between the sheets!"

"Sure. And the boys I work for are cute, too."

"Work for?" Monica repeated, puzzled.

"Just like you work for Gus Deane, Monica," Johnny said slowly. "Only my boss is the man with the big dollar bill across the front of his hat."

Monica's eyes were bright. "I don't know what you mean," she mumbled. But she did. She looked acutely sick.

Johnny's eyes glittered at her reaction to his audacious lie. He said nothing.

"Oh, my God!" she whispered. "A Treasury Agent. Immigration!"

Johnny nodded. "Now that you've got the whole story, how do you like it?"

Monica stood up, trembling, her eyes hunted. "I don't think I like any of it, Johnny!" she cried. "And I know

one thing for sure. I hate you completely, Johnny! Good-bye!"

She stalked out of El Turco.

Johnny Blue watched her go. He knew she was only bluffing. She believed him all right. She believed his lie that he was an immigration man. And what she would do about it would make the results at El Camino Real tonight quite interesting.

Johnny grinned darkly in anticipation.

5.

Inside the *salón de baile* the juke box drummed out a monotonous cacophony of dance music, totally uninspired and dreary. A few of the plush patrons moved lazily about the dance floor. The deserted bandstand was unfortunately not very much missed.

From the shadows of the *manzanita* and juniper Johnny Blue moved into the patio outside under the pepper trees and stood there a moment, glancing about furtively. He wondered where Roxie Hall was. Quite possibly out with Salinas again. Salinas!

After last night's episode in the *teatro*, Johnny Blue was completely fed up with Salinas and everything he stood for. For the life of him he could not figure why Roxie was so fascinated by him. Perhaps it was that little Hitler mustache, or the evil twinkle in the man's black, poisonous eyes.

Johnny moved quietly into the *posada* near the pórtico where the night clerk sat at the main desk. The clerk did not notice him. Johnny turned and stole soundlessly up the carpeted stairs to the second floor.

He felt into his pocket and pulled out the long-bladed knife. He ran his thumb along the edge and smiled. This was the only kind of thing a man like Joel Salinas understood. Action with a capital A.

The door to Salinas' office was ajar. Johnny pushed it open and slipped inside the room. One lamp was burning. Salinas' desk was situated in one corner, facing diagonally out into the room. Johnny slipped quickly over to it and then stepped around by the chair facing it.

He leaned down and tried the center drawer. It was

locked. He jabbed the knife into the middle and sawed it about. With a few expert slashes he peeled slivers of wood off the drawer and the desk frame.

He glanced at the carpet. The slivers lay there in plain sight.

Johnny Blue moved quickly about the room. There were five paintings hanging on the wall. It would be behind one of them, he thought. He tried them, one by one, pushing from the side, and pressing in on the canvases.

The third one, the one of Mexico City by Diego Rivera, was the key. As he pressed the lower right corner, the entire painting, frame and all, swung out from the wall. A compact little monster of a safe was revealed, inset in the wall.

Johnny Blue moved the blade of the knife over the metallic surface and then spun the knob several times, listening to the tumbler fall into place.

Then he stood back, grinning. He pushed the painting back into place.

He moved over to a small bookcase in the corner and pulled two books out and let them drop on the floor. Then, after a moment's thought, he went over to the desk again and pushed several papers onto the floor.

He glanced around, surveying the office. It had an artistic, careful air of disarray about it.

Just right, Johnny Blue thought, and left.

6.

It was one of those crazy things. The longer Johnny sat there in the womb of darkness, the more his mind drifted to thoughts of Roxie Hall. He shook his head angrily once again, pulled a cigarette out of a pack, set fire to it, jammed it into his mouth with a flourish and focused his eyes on darkness once again.

He had come back to his own flop, the Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa, to wait it out. The wheels should be turning, and the action should begin operating now with all the inevitability of a Greek drama. The man responsible for all of it should be coming for him, sneaking up in the dark as all night people do, to precipitate the final showdown.

And Johnny hoped the better man would win!

But Roxie intruded on Mr. Blue's thoughts again. She was simon-pure and innocent. What had made her become intoxicated with a freak of nature, a sadistic beast, a demonic degenerate like Joel Salinas?

Strange were the ways of women, Johnny mused.

She would walk the same path the others had walked. Booze. Dope. And then the big tranquilizer.

Johnny shuddered. He puffed on his cigarette.

Outside the crickets chirped, and somewhere a desert owl boomed three times. For a flatland to all appearances deserted, the sandy countryside around El Camino Real was always a fascinating surprise to Johnny. Millions of bugs came alive at night. Bugs, animals, and beasts.

Johnny thought of the softness of Roxie's lips, the touch of her hand, the scent of her hair. . . .

Then he heard it.

It was the unmistakable sound of footsteps, of someone outside, hurrying, but careful of the darkness.

The footsteps of the man who had come to settle accounts with Johnny Blue.

Johnny moved quickly to the wall beside the door and waited motionlessly.

The steps stopped outside the door.

Peering through the side of the window, Johnny could see a shapeless form. The form moved and a quick rap sounded on the panel.

Johnny frowned. That did not figure. The man who had come to get him would burst in through the door without knocking. Perhaps. . . .

Johnny moved quickly, pulled the door open, stepped lightly aside and grabbed the figure from the side, elbow around the neck, wrist jamming one arm up behind the shoulder blades.

And then he stepped back, the breath gushing out of his mouth in shock.

It was a girl.

Stunned, he had not time to react before the girl let out a cry of surprise. Johnny moved, then. He shut the door and drew the blind. He struck a match in front of him. It burst into flame between the two of them.

"Señor Blue?" The husky voice quivered in the light of the flame.

Johnny nodded. Vaguely, he recognized her. It was one of Joel Salinas' "nieces." It was the blonde girl with the golden eyes and the smooth olive skin.

"Honey," Johnny said with a sigh, "you almost got yourself chilled coming up on me that way."

The girl stared at him a moment. The match flame guttered out. Then, with an anguished cry, the blonde girl hurled her body on Johnny's neck, and clung to him desperately, sobbing uncontrollably.

"What the hell?" Johnny muttered. He tried to soothe the girl with a few gentle pats on the back, trying to extricate himself from her entwining arms.

"Oh, Señor Blue! I know you will help me. It is *una historia terrible* I must tell you! *La fabula*. How you say? —the fairy story. No one will believe it. Oh, Señor Blue! *Por favor! Atende!*"

Johnny's mouth twitched. He took the girl by the arms. In the darkness of the room he led her over to the side of the bed. He pushed her gently on the mattress and sat beside her. He got out another match and struck it.

"Okay, now, tell me what's bugging you."

"Oh, the good God!" the girl sobbed. "Where do I begin?"

Johnny had more time to study her and, now that he did, he was surprised. She looked absolutely gorgeous, with a fragile, shattering kind of beauty so startling as to be completely memorable. She had a flawless complexion, enormous golden eyes and soft, coral lips. Her body was lithe and slender, but she was firm and rounded gently, like a model in a fashion magazine. And there was an air of sensitivity about her face which hinted at a patrician background.

She was not one of Salinas' regular bedslat broads, there was no question about that.

If this stack of wheat was a call girl, she was the highest on the list.

"Well," Johnny smiled slightly, "You could begin at the beginning."

The golden eyes glanced up at him slantwise. The lips curved almost imperceptibly. "You mock fun of me."

"No, I don't 'mock fun' of you. I kid you not. What's your name?"

"Raquel." The lips closed tightly. "The last name need not concern you. I believe you understand."

Johnny nodded. "Shoot, Raquel."

She stared at him blankly, and then her face cleared. "Sí. Tiro. At the beginning. It begins where all such stories begin, Señor Blue. With the foolish girl. Raquel, the fool."

Johnny breathed softly. "A very lovely fool, if a fool."

"Sí," Raquel said darkly. "And that is the problem. Too beautiful for the small Chihuahua village I am born in, Señor Blue. So I dream of the bright lights. Mexico City. Acapulco. Ahah!" The golden eyes glittered, "Hollywood!"

Johnny's face froze. "The movies?"

"Sí. El cine!" the girl said. "And that is the beginning of the end."

Johnny nodded, striking another match. "Go on."

"Two years ago, Señor Blue, I am barely sixteen years old. I meet on the *calle mayor* of our village un hombre who is driving through in *un gran Cadillac*. One of your big rich cars. You know?"

Johnny said he knew.

"El Señor represents himself to me as what is called in your country a 'scout for talent'. He tells me I am *el tipo especial* he looks badly for. He desires me in a new motion picture he produces for Hollywood."

"Go on, kid."

"Who am I to sneer at Hollywood, U.S.A.? I agree to sign papers with him. He is make me *la estrella*, the star."

The match went out. Johnny lit another.

"But then strange hitch develops. *El director* wants screen testings of me. I agree to make testings. But testings must be photographed in Hollywood. *El director* is unable to get passport for me to come to U.S.A. because of technicalities I do not understand. Deal is arranged. I am posed in place near Border. I will need no passport." The girl eyed Johnny tearfully. "You will not believe me, Señor Blue. I come. I am the foolishness of women."

Johnny sighed. "You're not the only girl who dreams of stardom, Raquel," he said gently.

"You are kind," She shrugged. "I am *la boba*. The fool. I come. I am brought to El Camino Real. I live in

apartamento with other girls likewise being sent for testings for *el cine*. Then, last night—"

The girl stifled a sob.

Johnny's eyes narrowed. "Last night?"

"Last night we go into room at back of *posada*. Many scouts for talent are waiting to view us. But we must be seen without clothes on, masked by ballroom masks so scouts for talent cannot tell which is which. We are to be judged for our beauty only. He say this to us."

Johnny gritted his teeth. The girl's face turned red. She looked down.

"I do not know your country, but I begin to think all is not right. Then, one by one, we girls go marching out into next room."

"I know!" Johnny broke in.

"And you start the big fight, which makes me believe you are for us, and not for them. So I come to you. For help. For escape. I cannot go to *policia*. I am in the United States—how you say?—illegitimately. I can go to no one!"

"Sure, kid," Johnny said. "You came to the right guy."

"You will aid me?"

"I sure as hell will aid you, Raquel. But first of all I'm going to get you out of here and put you somewhere safe. I don't want you bothered by the man who got you into this."

"Señor Salinas," said Raquel in confirmation.

"Señor Salinas," Johnny muttered.

The girl looked at Johnny a moment and then leaned forward impulsively and kissed him on the mouth. Her cheeks, wet with tears, touched Johnny's skin. He felt a shiver all through him.

"Come on, Raquel," he said gruffly. He pulled her up from the bed. Together they moved quietly and swiftly out of the Mission San Obispo de Tolosa and over the trail to the parking lot behind the *posada*.

7.

At the open telephone booth one mile from El Camino Real in the direction of Cholla City, Johnny Blue pulled

the Jag up to the shoulder of the road and rang for Sheriff Storm.

After a moment Storm came on, sounding uneasy and jumpy.

"Johnny Blue here," Johnny said.

There was an immediate silence. Then Storm said cautiously: "What's sticking in your craw?"

"You, mostly," Johnny said slowly. "But I think you can be saved."

"From myself?" Storm laughed, "Come on now, amigo."

"I've got a witness."

"Witness?" Storm repeated vaguely.

"She's a hanging witness. I want her protected."

"Thought you took me for a boughten man. How come you're trusting me?"

"Because I think that beneath that hardboiled exterior there beats a human heart."

"Should I feel flattered or not?"

"Never mind. What about it?"

"Bring him in."

"It's no him. It's a her."

Storm whistled. "Sounds like dynamite."

"So?"

"I'll be here waiting."

"Bueno. Give us forty minutes."

"Is this connected up with what we were talking about earlier today?" Storm asked.

"Something like," Johnny said cautiously.

"Good! Get moving."

8.

The night was an inverted bowl of black ink, with the stars shimmering in the middle like far-off fireflies, and bugs and flying beasts of all kinds swirling in the headlights. The twin beams of the Jag cut through the blackness like guiding lights to the weary travelers, and the wind whipped against the sides of the car as it ate up the gleaming ribbon of macadam ahead.

Raquel sat beside Johnny, her face glowing in the dashboard's subdued illumination, her eyes intelligent and thoughtful. She was wringing her hands together, moving

her lips slightly as she discussed something with herself silently.

Then she spoke out loud.

"Señor Blue," she said, "I wish you to know one thing. I did nothing last night. I did not go to the man who bought me. I ran. I ran to my room and I sank down on the floor and I cried. Do you believe me?"

"I believe you," Johnny said, reaching out his hand and touching her blonde hair. "Otherwise why should you have come to me?"

She smiled. "I had hoped you would understand," she said. She again lapsed into silence. Then she sighed deeply.

"No one was ever such a fool, Señor Blue, as Raquel. *La gran boba!* You must believe that. And this too you must believe. Raquel will no longer be the fool she once was."

"Was it Salinas himself who approached you in Mexico?" Johnny asked.

"Si," she said immediately. "He was the man. *Un hombre malo*, Señor Blue. Truly *un hombre malo*."

Johnny nodded. "And the other girls? The same story?"

"Si. The same story. That Señor Salinas, he was all over the countryside. Like an evil dream."

Johnny's eyes narrowed. "Savvies the land pretty well, huh?"

"But yes."

Of course, Johnny thought. It had happened to Marky and to Juana. And God only knew how many other girls before them. They had been approached in Mexico by Salinas, brought to El Camino Real and sold as call girls to the lechers from Hollywood who supported the whole lousy racket. Then, when they had gotten fed up with the life, they had run away.

Returning to El Camino Real with her husband Brad, Marky had known instantly that Salinas would recognize her. She had demanded that Brad take her away forever. Maybe Brad had guessed the truth. Or maybe Salinas had seen Marky and had thought Brad had come to blackmail him or demand tribute for keeping quiet. So Salinas, scared, had almost killed Brad in trying to throw a scare into him.

And Juana. The same story, possibly. With a little change. In that case, Salinas had caught up with Juana in San Color and had threatened her with exposure if she would not come through with extortion money. When that had failed, Salinas had forced Juana to obtain the money by stealing her husband's safe key—anything, in short, to keep her past quiet.

One of those old sordid stories.

Marky and Juana had both decided to end it all when Salinas had attacked their husbands.

And now there were more girls crossing the Border, entering the States illegally, lured by the promise of fame and fortune and then diverted into the stews of the flesh marts as soon as they arrived.

Except a few. Except the tougher ones. The ones like Marky and Juana and Raquel who had wanted out.

"Raquel," Johnny said softly.

"Sí, Señor Blue?" she said quickly.

"Don't worry," Johnny said. "I'll get you out of this. Trust in me."

She nodded her head happily.

He spoke noble words which had little basis in fact. Four seconds later, by the clock, the first of the rifle shots sounded. One slug hit the back of the Jag's body. The second hit the left rear tire and blew it out. The third and fourth smashed the rear window.

The car went out of control completely, wobbling over the center line and into the opposite lane. Then it slewed to the left and pitched into the soft shoulder of the road. Johnny fought the steering wheel to keep the Jag from turning turtle.

When the car hit the sand it jolted to a stop quickly, throwing both Johnny and Raquel against the dashboard. Johnny's head hit the steering wheel, but he had thrown a protective hand against Raquel's breast, keeping her from colliding with the windshield.

Johnny jumped out and yelled to Raquel to follow him. He could see behind him on the highway. The car from which the shots had come was slowing down, its bright beams knifing through the night, illuminating the area from left to right.

"Come on! Hurry up! Pronto!" Johnny cried. The girl

piled out of the car and started after him. He ran through the sand toward the wilderness of brush and trees ahead. They had a chance out there. They had none behind them, near the highway.

Ahead of them ghostly apparitions of junipers and manzanita reached their branches into the skies like crucified shapes. A slight hollow in the terrain opened below them. Johnny ran, pulling Raquel along with him. If he could get to the declivity and duck out of sight before the men in the following car reached the Jag. . . .

Stumbling and panting, the two of them floundered down the slope and into the gulley cut by the quick cloudbursts of winter. They followed the turning direction of the gully. It widened and deepened.

Behind them they heard a car slam to a stop. Doors opened and closed. A yell pierced the night.

"This way!" Johnny urged.

The girl whimpered, trying to keep up in her awkward, stumbling, lurching progress. The gulley deepened and then took a right turn. Now they were almost completely out of sight of the roadway.

"There they are!" cried a male voice across the sandy stretch back of them. "In the gulley!" Johnny recognized the voice. It belonged to Art Feist. The head torpedo of El Camino Real. Salinas' gun arm.

Johnny ran faster than he had ever run before. The gulley turned almost a complete circle, and then back again, in an S shape. And then, just as he and the girl thought they were safe, they ran into a dead end.

The entire gulley had caved in on both sides, forming a wall of powdery sand that blocked their passage. Cursing, Johnny hauled the girl with him up the sandy slope, sinking deeply into the loose dusty stuff.

Behind them pounded running feet.

Then they heard a shot. Then another. And a third.

"Don't shoot!" Feist cried to his companion. "We've got them!"

Johnny churned his legs and strained, but the sand was pulling him down as fast as he moved up. He turned, looking into the shadows behind him. Two shapes loomed up. Johnny could not move ahead any faster. The girl whimpered like a cornered animal.

One of the shapes jumped at him.

Johnny let go of the girl and turned to fend off Feist's attack.

It was no good. He drew blood with his first blow, but at the same time he felt Feist's powerful, smashing blow to his skull.

The night and a darkness blacker than night swallowed him up.

13

HE KEPT WAKING up and drifting off, and it seemed that he could never push back the clouds of forgetfulness long enough or far enough to orient himself. He could remember the blackness of night, the murmur of voices, the girl's scream, the lonely wind of the wide open spaces, and then once again oblivion.

Silence.

Darkness.

Solitude.

He opened his eyes. Things swam into focus with a stark kind of finality. He saw the shimmering sparks of stars hung high on a backdrop of black velvet. He saw a face leaning down over him. He felt the touch of hair, brushing intimately on his forehead.

"Johnny!" she whispered tremblingly.

Roxie Hall.

He sat up, and felt a swelling, knifing pain ballooning in his head, jolting through him. He groaned and closed his eyes, touching careful fingers to his skull. He felt the bump. He felt the dried blood.

"Roxie?" he whispered curiously. The desert breeze toyed with his hair and she leaned down beside him, her eyes wide and anxious.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm all wrong," he replied testily, shaking his head to clear it. He glowered at her. "What in hell are you doing out here?"

"I followed them."

Johnny frowned, trying to put the jigsaw puzzle to-

gether. His mind was still a box of unassembled pieces, waiting to be fitted.

"Them? Who's them?"

"Oh, that big bouncer of Joel Salinas'. And his first lieutenant."

"Feist," Johnny snarled. He remembered the shooting, the pursuit, the attack. He remembered the blonde Mexican girl. He remembered Raquel.

Roxie looked concerned. "They took her back toward El Camino Real."

Johnny jumped to his feet. "Salinas has her, then. Come on, kid. We've got to get her away! She's in danger!"

"How do you know?" Roxie asked. "I thought she was one of Joel's girls."

"It's a long story," Johnny snapped. "How did you get here? In the Comet?"

"Yes," Roxie said, stumbling through the sand after Johnny. "Don't go so fast!"

"We've got to, Roxie. To save that girl's life."

2.

Roxie tooted the Comet skillfully down the highway in the direction of El Camino Real. Johnny sat next to her with his hand held soothingly over his eyes.

"Let's back up a minute," Johnny said. "How did you come to follow Feist, anyway?"

Roxie turned and looked at Johnny.

"I saw you drive out with the Mexican girl. Then, before you had left the parking lot, I saw Feist and the other man hurrying down from Salinas' office. They hopped in Feist's car and took out right after you. I just got the idea something was up. I hopped in the Comet and followed."

"Sort of a ring-around-the-rosie," Johnny grinned.

"I saw the shooting and I pulled the Comet off the road into the sand behind a juniper. When they took the girl, I came to hunt for you."

Johnny grunted. "I'm surprised you should bother. I thought you were in so solid with Salinas you had decided to let things be."

Her eyes flared. She almost twisted the car off the road. "In solid with that two-bit Don Juan?"

Johnny stared at her. His face felt hot. "You didn't seem exactly to be bleeding during your performance on the Auction Block last night."

"Auction Block?" Roxie repeated. "What Auction Block?"

She was a good actress, Johnny thought.

"Don't try to hype me, kid. I saw you plain as day, up on that podium, naked as a jaybird, displaying your wares for the buyers—"

Her eyes blazed. "What are you noodling about?"

Johnny grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand from the steering wheel. He shook it. The bangles of the charm bracelet jangled against the hum of the Comet's engine.

"The girl on that stage last night had these bracelets on," Johnny snapped. "I couldn't see your face, but I know it was you. Are you going to deny it?"

"I don't understand any of it," Roxie said softly, watching the roadway ahead.

Johnny snorted. "I suppose you're going to say now you aren't one of Salinas' tall girls. I suppose you're going to try to say you're still lily-white pure!"

"I am!" Roxie cried. "I've never had anything to do with Salinas! I've only been down here trying to find out the truth about who framed my brother Ed."

Johnny put his hand over his eyes again and leaned back in the seat. He thought back to the *teatro*. He remembered Salinas' expression. He remembered the glittering amusement in Salinas' eyes when he had brought out the nude with the red domino, the red G-string, the red stockings and the charm bracelet. Perhaps that had been a sardonic joke of Salinas', one on Johnny Blue, a wedge to drive between Roxie and him.

That bracelet might have had a mate. If Salinas had given one to Roxie, and its twin to one of his bought-and-paid-for girls. . . .

"So what have you unearthed about Salinas?" Johnny asked.

"He's at the bottom of everything. The tall girl racket. My brother's jailing, Juana's death. But how can we prove it?"

Johnny stared grimly at the road ahead of them, twisting and unwinding over the sandy arroyos.

"We can't. But we've got to get that poor girl, Raquel, out of there. She's back in Salinas' cribs, probably." Johnny muttered. "Along with the other merchandise." He cursed under his breath. "I'll tell you all I know later. Right now, stand by for action. We're coming into El Camino Real."

"I dig, maestro," said Roxie, slowing the car down, and moving over toward the shoulder of the highway.

3.

Without lights they pulled silently into the parking lot and came to a stop under the shadowy protection of the *posada* wall. All was silent about them.

"Come on," whispered Johnny.

Roxie nodded.

They climbed out of the Comet and headed for the patio entrance, keeping to the shadows and moving stealthily.

But not stealthily enough.

"Hold it!" cried a ragged voice, coming out of the murky night.

Feist! Johnny felt his flesh crawl. He seized Roxie's arm.

"I see them!" someone else shouted.

"We've got to run for it!" Johnny grated out. "There's two of them. They've got us zeroed in. Come on. Through the patio. Into the *posada*."

"But Johnny?" gasped Roxie.

"We've got to! Maybe I can figure out something." And maybe not, Johnny thought grimly.

4.

They passed through the patio swiftly, through the back door, and into the pórtico in back of the night clerk's desk. Johnny pointed to the door of the salón de baile. It was deserted in there now. The door was slightly ajar.

Roxie nodded.

They dashed through the pórtico, across the front of

the stairs and slipped in through the doors of the dance hall. The darkness of the quiet *salon de baile* closed in over them with its welcome hiding spots.

They moved across the floor and toward the corner where the bandstand stood. Johnny could see the piano looming up in the darkness. He and Roxie waited a moment, listening, and then Johnny climbed up the bandstand. There was no exit out through the back way, but maybe he could think of some way to get out.

He glanced around. It was pitch black but he could make out the vague shapes of the chairs and the music stands. He could see the hook-in microphone shoved into the corner. And he could see the vague shape of a trumpet case.

Johnny frowned. Did that case belong to the new trumpet man? No. It was probably Brad's spare horn. He had had an extra. In all the excitement of Brad's departure and accident, Johnny had never noticed the spare. He looked at the case a long time and then stepped over and opened it.

Roxie stood beside him, shivering.

Outside they could hear the pounding of Feist's feet up and down stairs, and in and out of rooms.

Johnny picked the horn out of the case and looked at it for a moment. He worked the valves up and down absently.

"Johnny! What are you doing? They'll be here in a minute. Then what do we do?"

Johnny did not answer. He removed the mouthpiece from the horn and cupped it in his hand. Then he shut the case up and put it down in the corner again.

A vague idea was forming in the back of Johnny's mind. He did not know exactly how he could work it, but the opportunity might present itself. Then he could act.

And for now. . . .

"The dance hall!" Feist's heavy voice shouted just outside the doors.

"We've got them! They're cornered in there. They must be. There's no other place!"

Johnny grabbed Roxie and moved quickly along the wall with her, heading for the door through which the guards would enter. There might be a chance. . . .

Then the ballroom was a blaze of light. Feist had foresight. He had lighted it from outside. Now, when Feist and his guns entered, they could see Roxie and Johnny plainly.

The door opened.

At the same moment a piercing, hysterical, ear-shattering scream resounded through the upper floor of the *posada*.

It was the kind of a scream that is overt evidence of terror, horror, disbelief and fear, all mixed into one glorious, soul-shaking sound. It made the hackles rise on the back of the neck. It chilled the blood. It made a man's knees go to water.

And then, one split second later, there was a gun shot, and then two, and then another.

5.

Silence closed down over the *posada*. Then Johnny and Roxie heard a loud yell outside the doorway to the *salón de baile*.

"Upstairs! They're upstairs!" Feist cried.

Feet tramped across the floor of the *pórtico* and took the stairs two at a time, pounding into the hallway upstairs.

"Now!" Johnny whispered and pulled Roxie along with him towards the entrance of the ballroom. Glancing hurriedly around, he saw the deserted *pórtico* and the stairway.

"The coast is clear!" he muttered, and ducked out into the *pórtico* out of sight of the night clerk. He led Roxie around the edge of the stairway and pulled her out of sight with him.

Muffled voices drifted down from the second floor.

"No, damn it, they're not up here!" a strident voice cried half shouting, half snarling. Joel Salinas.

"Okay, boss," Feist growled angrily. "We heard some broad scream. We thought—"

"You're not paid to think!" yelled Salinas. "Now get down there and find them! They're in the hotel somewhere! Smoke them out!"

"Okay," Feist muttered darkly.

Johnny and Roxie heard Feisi and his man come down the stairs together.

"They're going into the ballroom now," Johnny whispered, holding Roxie against the wall. "The minute we hear the sound of their voices inside, we're going to make a break for the stairs. Got it?"

"Got it!"

He squeezed her hand.

A moment later they could both hear the creak of the doors to the dance hall. Then the voices of the two men came to them, hollow-sounding and reverberating from the acoustics of the *salón de baile*.

"Now!" cried Johnny, hauling Roxie around the corner of the stairs. They took them two at a time, running up into the upper corridor.

The hall was deserted. A rectangle of light shone on the carpet of the hallway from Salinas' office. Across the hall someone was pounding savagely on a door. A muffled voice came from inside the room.

Johnny and Roxie ran to the closed door.

"I'll kill you, Joel!" cried the voice from inside, a voice almost hysterical with frustration and anger.

"It's Holly Salinas," Johnny whispered to Roxie. "He's got her locked up across the hall. I wonder why?"

He glanced over at the open door to Salinas' office.

"Roxie," Johnny said softly, "you stay here in the hall. If you hear anybody coming, duck into Salinas' office."

Roxie nodded. "Good luck, Johnny."

"Luck I need."

He pulled out the mouthpiece of Brad's horn and tightened his grip on it for good luck. Then, from his jacket pocket, he unclipped a pencil and shoved it through the lip end of the mouthpiece. Clutching this in his hand, he sidled into Joel Salinas' office.

The office looked as if a hurricane had hit it. Papers were thrown everywhere. The desk was riddled, with check stubs and receipts tossed about wildly. A chair was overturned. The carpets were pulled up and scattered about.

Johnny saw Joel Salinas.

The big, dark-haired, mustached flesh-peddler was bending over the wall safe behind the Diego Rivera, reaching

in and pulling out bundles of currency. He was dumping the currency into a canvas bag lying besides him on the floor. The bag's mouth was gaping to receive the boodle. Salinas was using one grabber for that work, and in his right hand he held a heavy Colt .45 automatic.

The man was so intent on his work that Johnny sneaked across the room and came up right behind him without alerting him. With a quick gesture Johnny pressed the mouthpiece of Brad's spare trumpet into the center of Salinas' neck. Pressuring the pencil, Johnny shoved tight with this metallic replica of a gun muzzle. He laughed softly as he did so.

"Hand me that bulldog, Salinas, or I'll blow your throat out."

Salinas winced and froze. He took a split second to react, and that was all the time Johnny needed.

"It's a gun all right, Salinas," Johnny rasped. "Can't you feel the metallic rim of the muzzle? This is no sucker stick, no John Dillinger. Give me that tickler or I'll fill your safe with something filthier than lucre."

Salinas handed back the .45 Colt to Johnny Blue.

Johnny took it, and moved quickly away from Salinas. He was familiar enough with small arms to know the most vulnerable spot to hold a gun on a man is directly behind him.

From six feet away he held the Colt .45 on Salinas. Salinas slowly turned around, his face almost black with chagrin.

Johnny waved the trumpet mouthpiece on the end of the pencil. "This is a special new caliber, Salinas!"

"Why you dirty, lousy fink!" shouted Salinas. "I might have guessed you'd try something like that!"

"Planning to blow the country, Joel?" Johnny asked easily, gesturing with Salinas' .45 at the canvas bag. "Little trip south a ways?"

Salinas' eyes narrowed. He glanced swiftly from the bag to Johnny.

"I'd go for a two-way split, Blue. You on the take?"

Johnny Blue laughed. "I'm just a third-rate piano pooper, Salinas. I'm in no position to be schmeered."

Salinas' face darkened. "The Treasury Department. I heard you were one of the Border Patrol."

"Pure fabrication, Salinas. I guess I exaggerated a little. Just a device to get you to move."

Salinas bit his lip. "Half is yours, Blue. I'm pulling out while the pulling's good."

"You macadamized my buddy, Brad Samson."

Salinas shrugged. "Why not? I got a hot flash he was on to the operation. I had to move."

"And Ed Hall. You put him in the lock-up."

Salinas grinned. "Prove it."

"Now you want the whole shebang." Johnny waved the .45. "It's quite an operation."

Salinas' teeth gleamed whitely behind his black mustache. "Not mine, Blue. Even though you thought it was all my toy. Holly put it together. She's the big dog with the brass collar."

Johnny frowned. "Gallant type, Joel! Lay the blame on the dame."

"You don't get it yet. Holly brought me up from Mexico to run the racket. I never took out papers to make the cross. She's been holding that over me ever since I got here. Something to bounce me with. I had to keep the caper rolling."

"What else is she holding over you?"

"I've got a sort of a prison record down there and can't go back. I figured I'd best blow this squirrel cage when I wised up you were one of Uncle Sam's Immigration Ops."

Johnny Blue threw back his head and laughed long and loud.

He felt the slug hit him before he heard the concussion of the shot. It jolted his hand so hard the .45 went spinning into the corner. One instant later the room was vibrating with the ear-shattering explosion of the gun-shot.

Johnny spun and went to his knees, gasping with pain.

6.

At the door stood Holly Salinas, clenching an automatic in her fist. Smoke curled from the barrel. Held in front of Holly's breast for a human shield was Rexat

Hall, her face drawn and white, her lips trembling, her eyes glistening with tears of shock and chagrin.

"Get up, Johnny!" snapped Holly. "I'm a good target shooter. I didn't hurt you because I need your help."

Joel Salinas moved with the speed of lightning. In one bound he was behind the chair, diving for the .45 where it lay on the carpet. He went to his knees, stretching out a hand for the Colt, and Holly's gun moved toward him leisurely.

Another gunshot sounded. Salinas screamed out in pain, seizing his arm. He went down on the floor and lay there moaning.

"Don't make a move, Johnny," Holly said through tight lips. "At least, if you want to see Roxie Hall alive again."

"You're calling the signals, Holly," Johnny said tightly.

Holly nodded. "You can bet your shirt I am!" She gestured with the automatic. "Hand me that canvas bag. Instead of my darling husband, I'm going to take that trip to Mexico. You load it in the car for me, Johnny, and I'll let you have your everloving playgirl as a reward!"

Johnny's eyes locked with Roxie's. He gave her a warning glance. She understood. She closed her eyes and tried to quiet the trembling of her body.

Johnny stepped over Salinas' shaking form and picked up the canvas bag. He brought it to Holly, looking her in the eye. Her blue eyes were cold and blazing like hot ice.

"Get going, now," she told Johnny Blue. "One false move and I'll chop you down."

Johnny walked out of the office into the hallway, quietly and alertly, glancing from left to right, trying to cipher out some form of escape.

The corridor was not deserted. Johnny Blue moved carefully, starting for the stairs. Holly followed, still holding Roxie in front of her.

Once in the corridor, Holly had no protection from behind her. From that direction came the crisp voice barking out its order in firm, authoritarian tones:

"Drop that gun, Mrs. Salinas! The game is over."

Holly wheeled instantly, on reflex, firing as she turned. And as she fired, the heavy service pistol in Sheriff Storm's hand came down, barrel first, on the side of her skull.

She screamed and went down heavily, taking Roxie with her.

Johnny stared across the recumbent forms of the two women at Sheriff Dustin Storm. A smile crept onto his lips.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, sheriff. How does it feel to be a working man again?"

"Damned good," said Storm with a grin. "Thanks for the job."

7.

Three weeks later, by the calendar, Johnny Blue was Sheriff Dustin Storm again. The place was a dimly lit basement bistro in Los Angeles down on Figueroa, a place called The Den. Johnny saw Storm come into the joint alone, glance directly up at the bandstand and then look around for a table.

Johnny signaled for the ten-minute break and hurried down to the table to greet the Cholla City sheriff.

"Long time," Johnny said, shaking hands and sitting down. "How's with the jackrabbit and coyote belt these days?"

"Peaceful," said Storm with a grin. "And real nice since you boys blew the pueblo."

"I'll bet."

"Where's Roxie?" Storm asked, his eyes drifting curiously over the boys on the bandstand and the tables nearby.

"She comes on for the eleven o'clock show," Johnny said easily. "Man doesn't like to work his wife-to-be too hard, you know."

Storm's eyes widened. "So you finally got yourself cuffed."

Johnny grinned. "It's one good thing that came out of that El Camino Real nightmare. Place still there?"

"It's straight now. Just an overnight motel. Mighty tame after what it used to be."

"And you," Johnny said, looking Storm straight in the eye. "I never had a chance, but I always wanted to say thanks for showing up the way you did the night Salinas tried to lam with the receipts."

Storm's eyes held Johnny's. "You put me back on the straight road, amigo. Our score is settled. When you didn't show up, I figured I'd better check. I came out for a look-see."

"I see by the papers they extradited Salinas to Mexico where he'll be put away for a long time."

Storm nodded. "Holly is in the clink, too. How the queen bee will miss all that honey!"

Johnny grinned. He remembered how she had tried to sign him on as one of the palace drones. It had been a real close thing. He had been tempted.

"I hear Brad Samson has come out of the amnesia," Johnny said. "And Marky is on the mend, too."

Storm nodded. He looked away. "What's going to happen to Brad, Johnny?"

Johnny took a deep breath. "I've been brainpicking that one, too. We thought we might let him try out in the bull fiddle now that he hasn't got a lip."

Storm nodded. "That drummer boy. What about him?"

"He won't be able to hold sticks too good. But we may be able to use Skinhead on the bongos."

"It may all work out in time."

Johnny sucked his breath in tightly. "I sure as hell hope so. The parole boys figure Roxie's brother Ed may get off next time the board meets. They can't reopen the case, but next time Ed's name comes up, they'll release him."

Storm nodded. "You remembered those two duck-tailed haircuts named Sid and Dominic?"

"Gus Deane's do-gooders," Johnny breathed. "How could I forget them?"

"They're now the Cholla City Tigers, a kind of semi-pro football team that's going pretty hot. The star half-back is Sid Deegan. And the quarterback is Dominic!"

Johnny whistled. "God help Red Grangel!"

"And Gus Deane retired his presidency of the bank. He had a heart attack and now lives at home. He's out of local politics for good."

"Cholla City gets all the luck. It's guys like him who pave the way for operations like El Camino Crap-hill."

"I know," Storm said softly. "And buy up cheapies like me."

"What about Raquel, that nice blond girl from Chihuahua?"

"We fouled her with the rest. All the girls are back in Mexico now." Storm lifted his eyes to Johnny's face. "Raquel seems to have taken quite a liking to you, Johnny."

Johnny shrugged. "She was a square kid." His eyes narrowed. "And what about that crazy nympho who used to spy for Gus Deane? That bed bunny, Monica Stone?"

"Funny thing," Storm said. "She disappeared. Just up and vanished one night."

Johnny glanced up, startled. "When?"

"About three days ago."

"Maybe she got tired of Cholla City and wanted to try the bright lights."

Storm's eyes narrowed. "That's what we figured. We want to talk to her about some of her work for Gus Deane. Try to square away the El Camino Real business. But now. . . ."

Johnny stared at Storm's shrewd grey eyes. It was quite obvious what Storm was after now. News of Monica Stone.

"Oh, no!" cried Johnny, panic-stricken. "You don't mean she might have come north? To L. A.? You don't mean—"

Storm was looking over Johnny's shoulder. Johnny turned. Roxie was moving easily through the crowded room, smiling and holding out her hand to Dustin Storm.

"Good evening, sheriff!" she said.

He took her hand. "It's a pleasure, Miss Hall. I've heard a lot about your singing. I thought I'd see if the tributes were exaggerations."

"I'm sure they are. But thanks."

"Not at all." Storm turned to Johnny. "You're playing a different brand of music these days. I don't hear any more of that ricky-ticky stuff you put on for Salinas."

Johnny tried to cheer up. "We're playing exactly what we want to. Good old jazz. It's had a kind of resurgence in the past few months."

Roxie leaned over Johnny and kissed him on the cheek.

"Come on, Johnny. It's time for the eleven o'clock show. Will I see you after, sheriff?"

Storm stood. "No. Sorry. Adios, Roxie."

Roxie poked a forefinger in Johnny's chest. "Don't forget after the chaser, mister. I'm having that midnight steak at your place."

Johnny blinked. "My place? Oh, well, yeah. I don't quite know, Roxie. Let's make it some other night, shall we? Uh. Sheriff Storm and I have something we've got to palaver about." Johnny glanced at Storm. "Don't we, Storm?"

Storm smiled suavely. "If you say so, Johnny."

Roxie looked from Johnny to the sheriff, puzzled. "What have you two got cooked up? I'd almost think you were playing around with some other woman, Johnny." Then, as she walked away, laughing, she added, "Well, I'll wait for you at your place, anyway. Don't be too late, Johnny, and save your appetite. We'll have ourselves a cozy little supper party."

Johnny put his head in his hands, shuddering. "Yeah," he muttered to Sheriff Storm. "That's what it'll be, all right. The Last Supper. If that Monica kid is around the premises."

"Well, you can do one of two things," Storm said. "You can take both of 'em on in the same bed. Or you can call on me for rescue. Take your choice."

"I'll think it over," Johnny promised, a dreamy look in his eyes.

THE END

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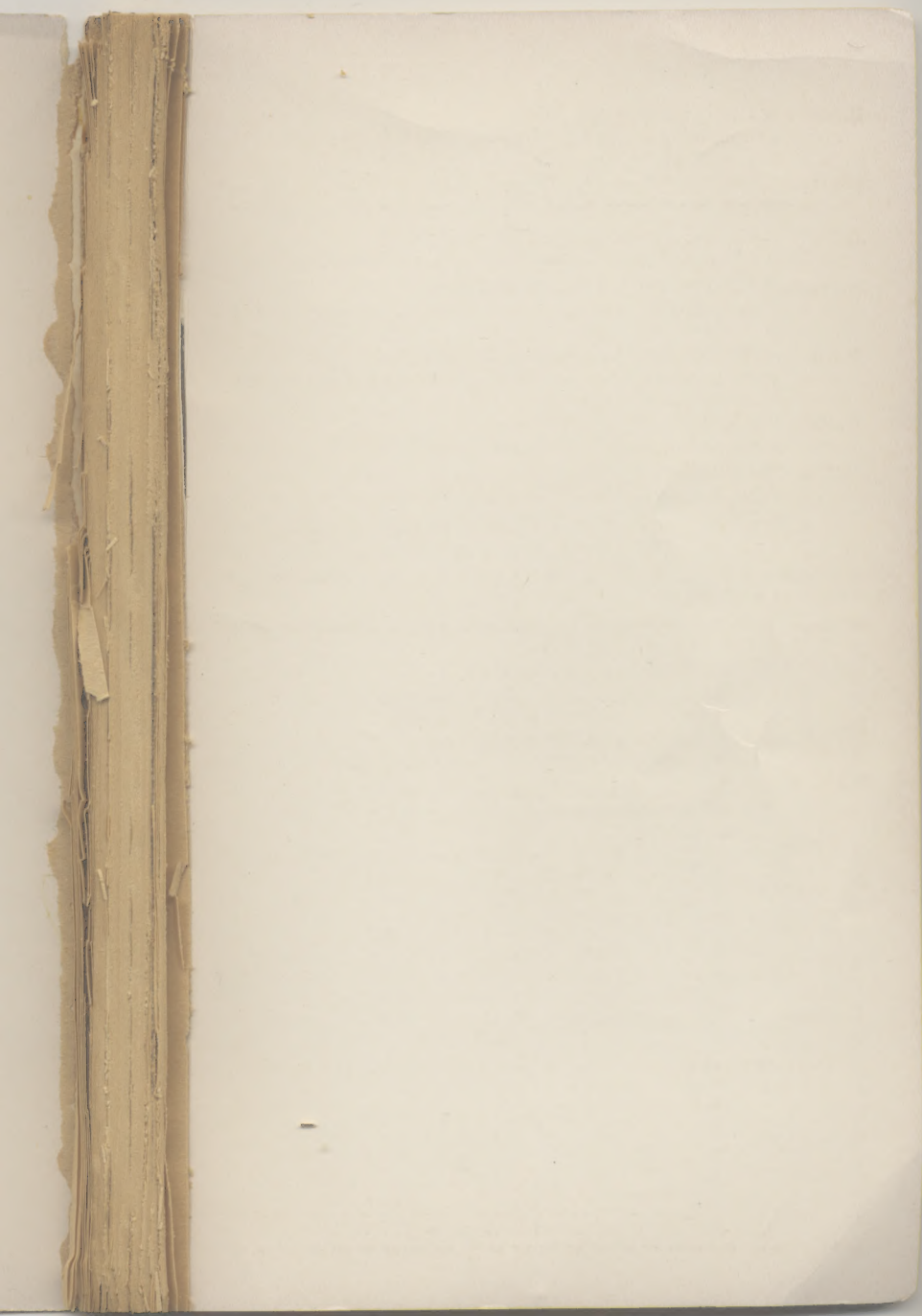
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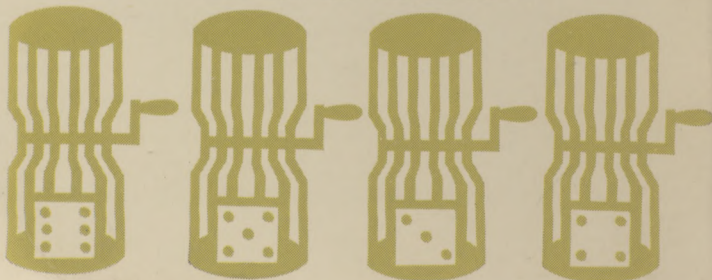
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